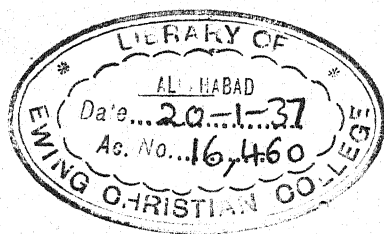


A BOOK OF TALES

A Collection of Short Stories
for Indian Students

EDITED BY
E. WILKINSON, B.A. (OXON)



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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

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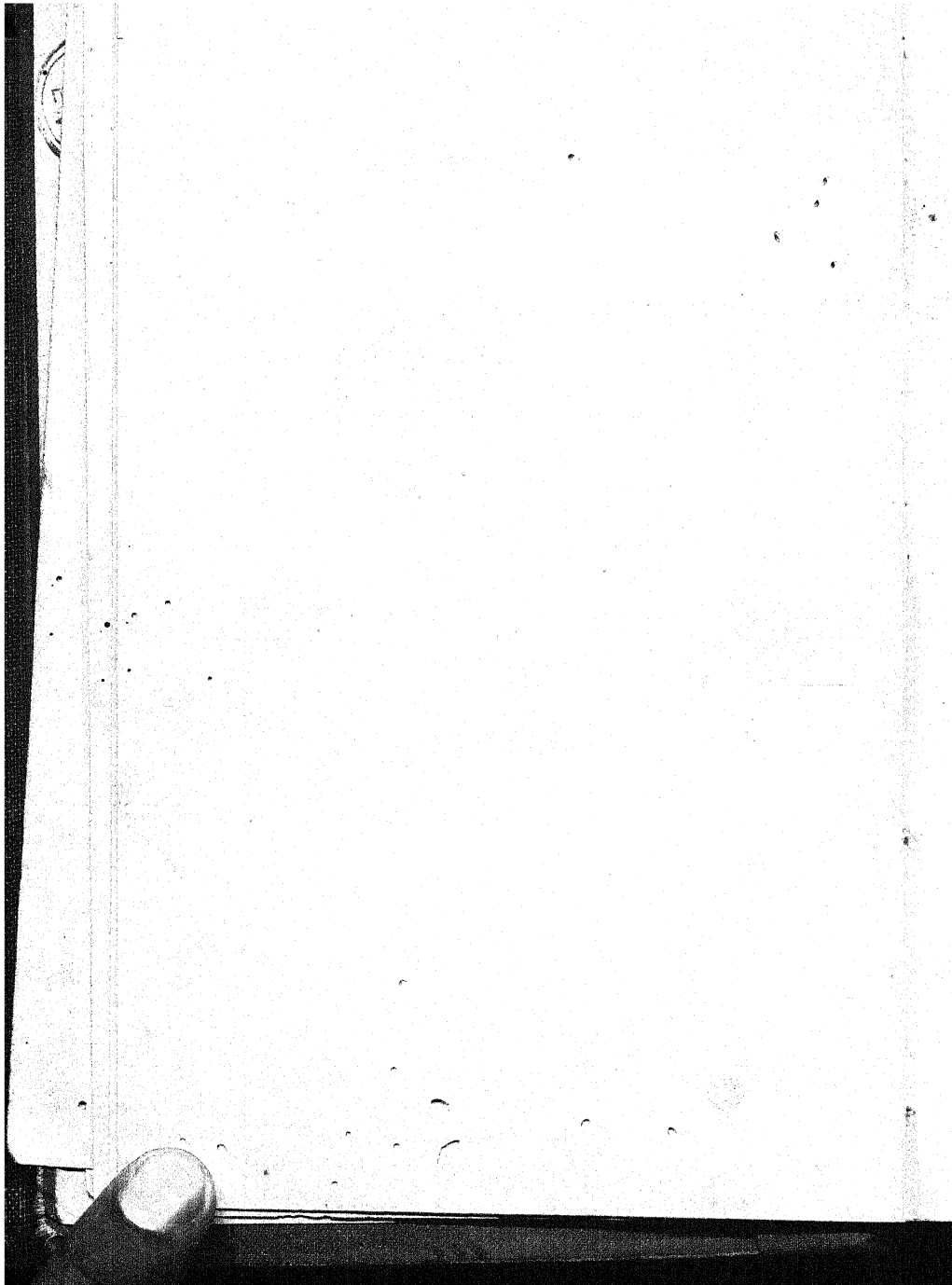
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PREFACE

THIS collection of short stories has but one excuse for its publication in the face of the many excellent anthologies which have been produced of late years. It is that it has been chosen and edited with the Indian student only in mind. Copyright difficulties are not the only ones to hamper a selection of tales for such a book as this. The editor has to keep in mind, too, the limitations of students' knowledge or interest. But the short story is the form of literature in which they seem always to take most pleasure, and if this book adds at all to their critical appreciation, its purpose has been achieved. From the short story, appreciation may well begin to step to literary forms of more artistic scope.

E. WILKINSON.



INTRODUCTION

ON SHORT STORIES AND THEIR WRITING

IN prefaces to collections of tales like this book there is one critical statement which is often and then decisively made. It is that the short story is the most recent, the most modern of all the forms which literature has taken, later than poetry, coming after the drama, following even the novel, its literary development belonging only to the last and present centuries. In a limited sense this is true enough, but in a wider it is profoundly untrue. It is untrue because brief tales are found in abundance, although often embodied in longer stories or poems, in the literatures of ancient Greece or India, of mediæval France or Arabia; the researches of the last fifty years or so have even disinterred from the sands of Egypt stories written on papyrus, the strange reed-writing material which the old time inhabitants of that land invented, and dated as far back as 1300 B.C. Everywhere, too, the short story has lived far more by word of mouth than by writing. Our earliest written records belong only to those countries with climates dry enough to preserve papyrus rolls or clay pots or stone carvings for the prying eyes of later millenniums, and it is a long time before there are many manuscripts of literature; but when they do appear it is to show that poetry had come to be the most popular literary form for writers. Yet it is not asking too much to believe that story-telling began before poetry, in the days when some primitive tribe gathered round a fire in a forest clearing, watching its evening meal cook, and someone told of his day's

adventures. Nor that there were always men at the sound of whose voices the rest grunted in satisfaction, for they had shown before their facility in remembering events, a dramatic gift for describing them so that their listeners seemed to live through them as well, and the ability to pick out the lively, interesting features of a bear hunt or tribal fight from the dull and trivial ones. Then how long would it be before exaggeration crept in? How long before a man, relating a fight unwitnessed by anyone else, would be able to resist blowing his own trumpet increasing the size of the mastodon or sabre-toothed tiger which, after a desperate struggle, had escaped his arrows, and so unfortunately left no hide as a proof of its incredible bigness, lengthening the hours and making more fierce his fight with a specially huge and hairy fellow from the tribe which lived close to them in the forest? There would always have been among the listeners, especially the old men, those who would grunt with annoyance: "That's not true; can't be; *I* never saw such a thing." But equally there would always be those who would listen, if not with belief, at any rate, with interest and amusement, and from this kind of relation it is but a small step to one openly and avowedly made up, but in which dramatic skill and imagination win that suspension of disbelief which is as essential to fiction as to poetry. All through the long ages since then it has been the same. The readiness and fondness with which man uses his imagination to enter into the life and experiences of his fellow-men is as evident to-day as ever it was around the primitive camp-fire. Children all over the world say, day after day, "Tell us a story." They clamour for one to their mothers and uncles and sisters, and where there are witches to tell of, giants, fairies, wolves which

speak, women who fly, men who stride a league in one step, they listen with open mouths, heads on one side, and completely absorbed and credulous attention before they go off to bed. To-day their grown-ups have far less time for stories even of a kind dealing rather more with everyday life than fairy tales, but in days when books, cinemas, theatres, radios, gramophones, and countless other amusements were not to be had, they were just as ready to listen; and the minstrel, the teller of tales, the man who could sing and play and dance and recite, was everywhere and always sure of his welcome. There are innumerable jokes in the world, many with the characteristics of stories; as much among what society calls low or indecent stories as well as decent. Their existence is as old as the hills. In time came verse, perhaps at first as much to help memory and combine with a musical instrument in song, as to take advantage of the great artistic possibilities of rhythm and emotionally heightened phrases; in time came the drama, in time the novel. But before them all was the short story.

Yet, in the limited sense that it was not seriously and deliberately written by men with a feeling for literary art, it is true that the short story is later than its companion forms. English poetry of the highest calibre is found in manuscripts of the eighth century, when Saxon tribes had not long divided the land in some kind of peace among themselves; plays were highly popular, and indeed better written than in any other period, in the time of Elizabeth, the sixteenth century, and had been turned out for long enough before; the novel was vigorously set on its feet in the eighteenth century. But the short story was not artistically developed until the nineteenth. Other countries have a similar tale to

tell. The reason for this has been put down to mysterious external forces inexorably moulding the artistic desires of men at various times, in literature, painting, sculpture, and music alike. But there is no need for this mysticism, this attempt to find something too subtle to be comprehended. The economic reasons are more than powerful enough, and these have been as important a force in literary as in historical change, far more so than is sometimes reckoned. In ancient and mediæval days the minstrel had to be a man who could tell his story around the camp-fire or in the feasting hall for nights on end, and in his day the long epic poem of warrior life grew; later, even for years after printing was invented, the author usually had to depend on the charity of some aristocratic patron, but, at any rate, he was free to write what he would without worrying how many copies he might sell, only dedicating his work to his patron—and so lyric verse had its most lucrative day; in Elizabethan times the popular enthusiasm for the theatre gave writers a way of earning their living free of all patronage, which persuaded many of them to write plays; in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the novel was profitably published not as a bound book sold for so many shillings, but as a succession of instalments contributed to issue after issue of some periodical journal. So in the nineteenth century came something which gave a financial fillip to the writing of short stories. This was the rapid growth of the popular magazine (it is a word coming from Arabic, and meaning simply "storehouse"), very different from the literary and intellectual journal of earlier date, and meant to interest a wider, less learned circle of readers. It grew up to begin with in America. The first American annual appeared in 1826, and was soon followed by monthlies and

journals of lesser period. They came rapidly into public favour and to-day the output of dailies, weeklies, monthlies and annuals in every country is staggering. It is difficult to credit that they all find readers. They were from the first of a different type from the sedate and stately papers which for some years before in England had attracted writers of the first quality, men like Addison and Goldsmith and Johnson. They looked for piquancy, originality of idea, freshness of interest, wittiness of dialogue, movement, vitality—no philosophic reflections, no lengthy descriptions. They wanted a general condensation. Among the earliest to take up such work was an American, Washington Irving, who came to England in the year 1804 and found a great popularity for novels of terror and ultra-romance, novels full of ghosts, monsters, the supernatural, the inexplicable and the horrifying. He realised that the effect of such things was heightened by brevity and he took gently to collecting legends and common tales of this kind and polishing and furbishing them up rather than to inventing original stories. But he fully realised that he was developing a new kind of fiction, and that other people were imitating him.

“I choose to take a line of writing peculiar to myself rather than to fall into the manner or school of any other writer. It is true other writers have crowded into the same branch of literature, and I now begin to find myself elbowed by men who have followed my footsteps; but, at any rate, I have had the merit of adopting a line for myself instead of following others.” Among his imitators was another American, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hawthorne, however, was one of those mistaken men who believe that a story or poem must not be left to amuse and entertain people, but to be really

good must instruct and uplift them. It must be a sermon as well as a story, and there is a deal of moralizing in him which is irksome and difficult to tolerate. Yet this trait in Hawthorne and his fellow authors led to the short story receiving the greatest impulse for artistic good it ever has done. For an American of genius came to laugh at the short story and stayed to admire. Edgar Allan Poe began by writing travesties of the popular fiction of his day, and ended by becoming a most discerning writer of the short story, one who first clearly realised and stated its artistic peculiarities, and the one who has had the most influence in its development.

What, if anything, is the difference between a short story and a novel which is very short? There are some tales called short stories which are decidedly longer than others commonly entitled novels. Is there anything to distinguish the two? There is one thing, and that is the literal unity, the singleness of the short story; it has one and only one thing to tell. It is not a test which is always easy to apply or infallible in its results, but it is surprising how much people do agree over the separation of tales, by its conscious or unconscious use. "The Time Machine," by Mr. H. G. Wells is accepted as a short story, "The Wheels of Chance," by the same author, of much the same length, as a novel. The short story achieves by its very nature that unity of action, that correlation of incident, which, ever since Aristotle wrote, has been accepted as vital to the artistic success of a literary work. Some novels fail from containing too much story; they have a lot to tell which is irrelevant, perhaps even contain material for two or three novels. On this point Aristotle is worth listening to.

"The unity of a plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action. One sees, therefore, the mistake of all the poets who have written about Hercules or Theseus or similar heroes; they suppose that because Hercules was one man, the story also of Hercules must be one story."

Again, it is not enough to tell a story as a series of episodes, unconnected or ill-connected: they must be woven together into a whole.

"The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts one imitation is always of one thing, so in poetry the story, as in imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole."

But the unity of the short story is brought about by its dealing with only one incident, unrelated, unconnected to any other whatsoever. There is no time for philosophic discussions about the universe, moralisings about the evils of society, ironic illustrations of the frailty of human nature. There is no time to permit the reader to see characters in a score of different situations and slowly learn to know them. The characters cannot become friends of the reader, not even acquaintances he has often seen about; they are only people he has passed in the street and looked at twice because of the jovial or twisted or hunted expressions of their faces. There is no time for description, for lyrical outbursts on

spring, flowers, sunsets, mountains or learned disquisitions on education, politics, social reform, religion. The sole interest is in the plot and the plot is successful only as it strikes the reader with the force and precision of a mechanical hammer falling on an anvil. It does not strike a great many irregular soft taps but only one hard, true blow: and if it misses its mark, if the point of the story fails to arouse interest with its one blow, it is a poor and unsuccessful story. Poe insisted on the qualities of compression and unity in the short story, that it should be read at a single sitting without the reader collapsing from exhaustion, and that all it contained should be directed to one subject.

"In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. . . . The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided."

Novelists have often confessed to altering their original design; occasionally they have even altered their work in a second edition. When Dickens was publishing one of his novels in weekly instalments he had scores of letters beseeching him not to let his heroine die. But when some one wanted R. L. Stevenson to change the ending of one of his tales he replied indignantly:

"The body and end of a short story is bone of the bone and blood of the blood of the beginning."

So long, then, as there is this singleness, this oneness of plot, length cannot be said to matter, although there are practical limits to the length which a story can attain without

letting the interest flag when it has only one thing to concentrate on, and all great writers know that the highest art often lies in the greatest economy of means, rather in suggesting and implicating than in stating laboriously and fully.

In addition to unity of idea and an elastic brevity, the successful short story has one thing more: it develops its story with a cumulative, rising interest, comes to a sudden climax, and so to an immediate, effective and most often unexpected ending. The climax frequently comes at the very end, in the last few words, as for instance, in the stories included in this book of "The Lifted Veil" or "The Gift of the Magi." At the same time brevity and a climax, however sudden and successful and however natural and credible, are not the complete recipe for a good short story. An English newspaper once offered prizes for the best *short* stories sent in to it. The prize winners included these.

A Ghost Story—He stretched out his hand, groping for the matches.

The matches were put into his hand.

Another Ghost Story—Two men were travelling in an express train. "I don't believe in ghosts," said one. "Don't you!" said the other and vanished.

An Adventure Story—Tommy met a lion. "Aha!" said the lion.

A Humorous Story (depending on puns on the words 'went for' and 'tramp')—Three vigorous girls once went for a tramp in a wood. The tramp died!

Now why does one protest against allowing these to be genuine short stories, despite their real tale, their brevity, their unity, even their climax? Here again the words of Aristotle are wise:

"Beauty is a matter of size and order, and therefore impossible either in a very minute creature, since our perception becomes indistinct as it approaches instantaneity or in a creature of vast size—say 1,000 miles long, as in that case, instead of the object being seen all at once, the unity and wholeness of it is lost to the beholder. Just in the same way, then, as a beautiful whole made up of parts, or a beautiful living creature, must be of some size, a size to be taken in by the eye, so a story or plot must be of some length, although of a length not too great to be taken in by the memory."

There must be sufficient artistic roundness and fullness in the plot for it to be satisfactory. Further the short story is not unresponsive to grace or vigour in style, although it is worth remarking that on the whole successful writers have been forceful rather than pleasantly charming, given to brief, curt statements and epigrammatic strength and not to the lazy beauties of one with a poet's feeling for rhythm and metaphor. O. Henry and Irving can be compared to illustrate this point; O. Henry has won a far greater reputation as a story-teller than Irving. Nor does it prohibit authors from making what they can of their characters—even a man passed in the street can be striking and noticeable or completely indistinguishable from his fellows. The good author uses his limited opportunities for a natural and inevitable succession of incidents in his plot, for human, living characters, and for beauty and power in his style. In these things the modern story writer, like the modern novelist, is considerably more careful than his brother of sixty or seventy years ago. There is a surprising amount of slipshod work even in Dickens and Scott, of which the veriest novice would be ashamed to-day.

Again, it seems to be more imperative in the short story than in the novel or play that the author should attempt only to entertain and not to teach or preach. A play which points a moral may still be a good one—Galsworthy has written several; a novel written for a definite purpose, say to show up some social evil, may still be very readable, for example, more than one by Dickens. But it is hard to find such a short story which is successful work. More than that it has specialised in its subjects, found some which have permitted more originality and vividness than others. There are a number of humorous tales with a sudden, surprising, laughable ending; some stories of the fortunes and misfortunes of love; a number of adventure, which rely on the exciting nature of their incidents to maintain interest. Then there are stories of imagination, dealing with the uncanny and the supernatural, ghosts, witches, monsters, all those beliefs we laugh at by daylight but which make the most cold-blooded feel a little uncomfortable of a dark night in a lone place. There are tales of sheer horror, whose aim is to curdle the blood, make the flesh creep and the hair stand on end, send shivers down the spine and make the knees tremble: they do not necessarily make use of the supernatural, although a good many ghost stories are frankly written to create horror. It is amazing how the human mind will come back to them despite the uneasy feelings they arouse, just as small boys will be kept awake by dreams of a frightening book or film, but will return time and again to such things. Here, dealing with the terrifying, the macabre, the incomprehensible, the short story has been most triumphant, and gone clear ahead of its rival literary forms. Then finally there is an extraordinary number of mystery tales, especially of crimes committed by ingenious

and daring criminals who are brought to earth by even more ingenious and daring detectives. Ever since Conan Doyle invented Sherlock Holmes, these famous private detectives have gone on increasing in fiction, until they have adventures of all lengths, at all intervals from a week upwards, the accounts of which sell at any price from a copper coin to five rupees. The astounding popularity of such mystery and crime stories, where the aim of the author is to conceal the solution as far as possible from the reader and to lead him on to all kinds of wrong tracks, has also spread to novels, plays and films.

These divisions do not pretend to be exhaustive nor is it suggested that all tales can be dropped into their places in them as pieces are set on a chess-board. But they are fairly adequate, and have been adopted as the basis for the sections of this book, in an attempt to illustrate the material from which the short story is chiefly made. In the first section are tales of Mystery and Imagination (a title adopted by Poe) where imagination is considered to include any element of the supernatural; in the second, of Adventure and Terror; in the third of Humour and Love. The difficulty of making nine stories illustrate at once the history and scope of the short story may be realised when it is estimated that since the Great War 100,000 have been published in Great Britain alone. For those who would like to read further in the short story the following writers are suggested as well worth while to take up.

E. A. Poe, Ambrose Bierce, R. L. Stevenson, A. C. Doyle, M. R. James, O. Henry, H. G. Wells, Guy de Maupassant, W. W. Jacobs: perhaps the best way to approach them is through the several very adequate anthologies published in recent years.

RIP VAN WINKLE

WASHINGTON IRVING

1783-1859

Washington Irving was born in New York in 1783. At the age of 21 he visited Europe for two years and later in his life he resided for a considerable time in England and Spain. In these two countries, as well as in his own, he collected local legends and polished them up into stories, but he had no inventive powers himself. He achieved considerable popularity in his lifetime, much more than he has retained since; he was a pioneer in the work, and the first American story-writer to win fame outside his own country. America has produced but few writers of ability and none of genius; Irving was such a man, of ability but not of genius. His best book was, maybe his earliest, "The Sketch Book," a collection of stories, essays and reminiscences. He died in 1859 in his own country.

A POSTHUMOUS WRITING OF DIEDRICH KNICKERBOCKER.¹

By Woden, God of Saxons,
From whence comes Wensday, that is Wodensday,
Truth is a thing that ever I will keep
Unto thylke² day in which I creep into
My sepulchre—

CARTWRIGHT.

WHOEVER has made a voyage up the Hudson³ must remember the Kaatskill³ mountains. They are a dismembered branch of the great Appalachian family, and are seen away to the west of the river, swelling up to a noble height, and lording it over the surrounding country. Every change of season, every change of weather, indeed every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers. When the weather is fair and settled, they are clothed in blue and purple, and print their bold outlines on the clear

evening sky ; but sometimes, when the rest of the landscape is cloudless, they will gather a hood of gray vapours about their summits, which, in the last rays of the setting sun, will glow and light up like a crown of glory.

At the foot of these fairy mountains, the voyager may have descried the light smoke curling up from a village, whose shingle-roofs⁴ gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape. It is a little village, of great antiquity, having been founded by some of the Dutch colonists, in the early times of the province, just about the beginning of the government of the good Peter Stuyvesant⁵ (may he rest in peace !), and there were some of the houses of the original settlers standing within a few years, built of small yellow bricks brought from Holland, having latticed windows and gable fronts, surmounted with weathercocks.

In that same village, and in one of these very houses (which, to tell the precise truth, was sadly time-worn and weather-beaten), there lived many years since, while the country was yet a province of Great Britain, a simple good-natured fellow, of the name of Rip Van Winkle. He was a descendant of the Van Winkles who figured so gallantly in the chivalrous days of Peter Stuyvesant, and accompanied him to the siege of Fort Christina. He inherited, however, but little of the martial character of his ancestors. I have observed that he was a simple good-natured man ; he was, moreover, a kind neighbour, and an obedient henpecked husband. Indeed, to the latter circumstances might be owing that meekness of spirit which gained him such universal popularity ; for those men are most apt to be obsequious and conciliating abroad, who are under the discipline of shrews at home. Their tempers, doubtless, are rendered pliant and malleable in the fiery furnace of domestic tribulation, and a curtain lecture is worth all the sermon in the world for

teaching the virtues of patience and long suffering. A termagant wife may, therefore, in some respects, be considered a tolerable blessing; and, if so, Rip Van Winkle was thrice blessed.

Certain it is that he was a great favourite among all the good wives of the village, who, as usual with the amiable sex, took his part in all family squabbles; and never failed, whenever they talked those matters over in their evening gossipings, to lay all the blame on Dame Van Winkle. The children of the village, too, would shout with joy whenever he approached. He assisted at their sports, made their playthings, taught them to fly kites and shoot marbles,⁶ and told them long stories of ghosts, witches and Indians. Whenever he went dodging about the village, he was surrounded by a troop of them, hanging on his skirts,⁷ clambering on his back, and playing a thousand tricks on him with impunity; and not a dog would bark at him throughout the neighbourhood.

The great error in Rip's composition was an insuperable aversion to all kinds of profitable labour. It could not be from the want of assiduity or perseverance; for he would sit on a wet rock, with a rod as long and heavy as a Tartar's lance,⁸ and fish all day without a murmur even though he should not be encouraged by a single nibble. He would carry a fowling-piece on his shoulder for hours together, trudging through woods and swamps, and uphill and down dale, to shoot a few squirrels or wild pigeons. He would never refuse to assist a neighbour even in the roughest toil, and was a foremost man at all country frolics for husking Indian corn or building stone fences; the women of the village, too, used to employ him to run their errands and to do such little odd jobs as their less obliging husbands would not do for them. In a word, Rip was ready to attend to anybody's business but his own; but as to doing

family duty, and keeping his farm in order, he found it impossible.

In fact, he declared it was of no use to work on his farm; it was the most pestilent little piece of ground in the whole country; everything about it went wrong, and would go wrong, in spite of him. His fences were continually falling to pieces; his cow would either go astray, or get among the cabbages; weeds were sure to grow quicker in his fields than anywhere else; the rain always made a point of setting in just as he had some outdoor work to do; so that though his patrimonial estate had dwindled away under his management, acre by acre, until there was little more left than a mere patch of Indian corn and potatoes, yet it was the worst-conditioned farm in the neighbourhood.

His children, too, were as ragged and wild as if they belonged to nobody. His son Rip, an urchin begotten in his own likeness, promised to inherit the habits, with the old clothes of his father. He was generally seen trooping like a colt at his mother's heels, equipped in a pair of his father's cast-off galligaskins, which he had much ado to hold up with one hand, as a fine lady does her train in bad weather.

Rip Van Winkle, however, was one of those happy mortals, of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown⁹ whichever can be got with least thought or trouble, and would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound. If left to himself, he would have whistled life away in perfect contentment; but his wife kept continually dinning in his ears about his idleness, his carelessness, and the ruin he was bringing on his family. Morning, noon, and night, her tongue was incessantly going, and everything he said or did was sure to produce a torrent of household eloquence. Rip had but one way of replying to all lectures of the kind, and that, by frequent use, had

grown into a habit. He shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, cast up his eyes, but said nothing. This, however, always provoked a fresh volley from his wife; so that he was fain to draw off his forces, and take to the outside of the house—the only side which, in truth, belongs to a henpecked husband.

Rip's sole domestic adherent was his dog Wolf, who was as much hen-pecked as his master; for Dame Van Winkle regarded them as companions in idleness and even looked upon Wolf with an evil eye, as the cause of his master's going so often astray. True it is, in all points of spirit befitting an honourable dog, he was as courageous an animal as ever scoured the woods—but what courage can withstand the ever-during and all besetting terrors of a woman's tongue? The moment Wolf entered the house his crest fell, his tail drooped to the ground or curled between his legs, he sneaked about with a gallows air, casting many a side-long glance at Dame Van Winkle, and at the least flourish of a broomstick or ladle, he would fly to the door with yelping precipitation.

Times grew worse and worse with Rip Van Winkle as years of matrimony rolled on; a tart temper never mellows with age, and a sharp tongue is the only edged tool that grows keener with constant use. For a long while he used to console himself, when driven from home, by frequenting a kind of perpetual club of the sages, philosophers, and other idle personages of the village; which held its sessions on a bench before a small inn, designated by a rubicund portrait of his Majesty George the Third. Here they used to sit in the shade through a long, lazy summer's day, talking listlessly over village gossip, or telling endless sleepy stories about nothing. But it would have been worth any statesman's money to have heard the profound discussions that sometimes took place, when by chance an old newspaper fell into

their hands from some passing traveller.¹⁰ How solemnly they would listen to the contents, as drawled out by Derrick Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, a dapper learned little man, who was not to be daunted by the most gigantic word in the dictionary; and how sagely they would deliberate upon public events some months after they had taken place.

The opinions of this junto were completely controlled by Nicholas Vedder, a patriarch of the village, and landlord of the inn, at the door of which he took his seat from morning till night, just moving sufficiently to avoid the sun and keep in the shade of a large tree; so that the neighbours could tell the hour by his movements as accurately as by a sundial. It is true he was rarely heard to speak, but smoked his pipe incessantly. His adherents, however (for every great man has his adherents), perfectly understood him, and knew how to gather his opinions. When anything that was read or related displeased him, he was observed to smoke his pipe vehemently, and to send forth short, frequent, and angry puffs, but when pleased, he would inhale the smoke slowly and tranquilly, and emit it in light and placid clouds; and sometimes, taking the pipe from his mouth, and letting the fragrant vapour curl about his nose, would gravely nod his head in token of perfect approbation.

From even this stronghold the unlucky Rip was at length routed by his termagant wife, who would suddenly break in upon the tranquillity of the assemblage and call the members all to naught; nor was that august personage, Nicholas Vedder himself, sacred from the daring tongue of this terrible virago, who charged him outright with encouraging her husband in habits of idleness.

Poor Rip was at last reduced almost to despair; and his only alternative, to escape from the labour of the farm and clamour of his wife, was to take gun in hand and stroll away into the woods. Here he would sometimes seat him-

self at the foot of a tree, and share the contents of his wallet with Wolf, with whom he sympathised as a fellow-sufferer in persecution. 'Poor Wolf,' he would say, 'thy mistress¹¹ leads thee a dog's life of it; but never mind, my lad, whilst I live thou shalt never want a friend to stand by thee!' Wolf would wag his tail, look wistfully in his master's face, and if dogs can feel pity, I verily believe he reciprocated the sentiment with all his heart.

In a long ramble of the kind on a fine autumnal day, Rip had unconsciously scrambled to one of the highest parts of the Kaatskill mountains. He was after his favourite sport of squirrel-shooting, and the still solitudes had echoed and re-echoed with the reports of his gun. Panting and fatigued, he threw himself, late in the afternoon, on a green knoll, covered with mountain herbage, that crowned the brow of a precipice. From an opening between the trees he could overlook all the lower country for many a mile of rich woodland. He saw at a distance the lordly Hudson, far, far below him, moving on its silent but majestic course, with the reflection of a purple cloud, or the sail of a lagging bark, here and there sleeping on its glassy bosom, and at last losing itself in the blue highlands.

On the other side he looked down into a deep mountain glen, wild, lonely, and shagged, the bottom filled with fragments from the impending cliffs, and scarcely lighted by the reflected rays of the setting sun. For some time Rip lay musing on this scene; evening was gradually advancing; the mountains began to throw their long blue shadows over the valleys; he saw that it would be dark long before he could reach the village, and he heaved a heavy sigh when he thought of encountering the terrors of Dame Van Winkle.

As he was about to descend, he heard a voice from a distance, hallooing, 'Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!'

He looked round, but could see nothing but a crow winging its solitary flight across the mountain. He thought his fancy must have deceived him, and turned again to descend, when he heard the same cry ring through the still evening air: 'Rip Van Winkle! Rip Van Winkle!'—at the same time Wolf bristled up his back, and, giving a loud growl, skulked to his master's side, looking fearfully down into the glen. Rip now felt a vague apprehension stealing over him; he looked anxiously in the same direction, and perceived a strange figure toiling up the rocks, and bending under the weight of something he carried on his back. He was surprised to see any human being in this lonely and unfrequented place, but supposing it to be some one of the neighbourhood in need of his assistance, he hastened down to yield it.

On nearer approach he was still more surprised at the singularity of the stranger's appearance. He was a short, square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair and a grizzled beard. His dress was of the antique Dutch fashion—a cloth jerkin, strapped round the waist—several pairs of breeches, the outer one of ample volume, decorated with rows of buttons down the sides, and bunches at the knees. He bore on his shoulder a stout keg, that seemed full of liquor, and made signs for Rip to approach and assist him with the load. Though rather shy and distrustful of this new acquaintance, Rip complied with his usual alacrity; and mutually relieving each other, they clambered up a narrow gully, apparently the dry bed of a mountain torrent. As they ascended, Rip every now and then heard long rolling peals, like distant thunder, that seemed to issue out of a deep ravine, or rather cleft, between lofty rocks, towards which their rugged path conducted. He paused for an instant, but supposing it to be the muttering of one of those transient thunder-showers which often take place in mountain heights, he proceeded.

Passing through the ravine, they came to a hollow, like a small amphitheatre, surrounded by perpendicular precipices, over the brinks of which impending trees shot their branches, so that you only caught glimpses of the azure sky and the bright evening cloud. During the whole time, Rip and his companion had laboured on in silence, for though the former marvelled greatly what could be the object of carrying a keg of liquor up this wild mountain; yet there was something strange and incomprehensible about the unknown, that inspired awe and checked familiarity.

On entering the amphitheatre, new objects of wonder presented themselves. On a level spot in the centre was a company of odd-looking personages playing at nine-pins. They were dressed in a quaint outlandish fashion; some wore short doublets, others jerkins, with long knives in their belts, and most of them had enormous breeches, of similar style with that of the guide's. Their visages too, were peculiar; one had a large beard, broad face, and small piggish eyes; the face of another seemed to consist entirely of nose, and was surmounted by a white sugar-loaf hat, set off with a little red cock's tail. They all had beards, of various shapes and colours. There was one who seemed to be the commander. He was a stout old gentleman, with a weather-beaten countenance; he wore a laced doublet, broad belt and hanger, high-crowned hat and feather, red stockings, and high-heeled shoes, with roses in them. The whole group reminded Rip of the figures in an old Flemish painting¹² in the parlour of Dominie Van Shaick, the village parson, and which had been brought over from Holland at the time of the settlement.

What seemed particularly odd to Rip was, that though these folks were evidently amusing themselves, yet they maintained the gravest faces, the most mysterious silence, and were, withal, the most melancholy party of pleasure he

had ever witnessed. Nothing interrupted the stillness of the scene but the noise of the balls, which, whenever they were rolled, echoed along the mountains like rumbling peals of thunder.

As Rip and his companion approached them, they suddenly desisted from their play, and stared at him with such fixed, statue-like gaze, and such strange, uncouth, lack-lustre countenances, that his heart turned within him, and his knees smote together. His companion now emptied the contents of the keg into large flagons, and made signs to him to wait upon the company. He obeyed with fear and trembling; they quaffed the liquor in profound silence, and then returned to their game.

By degrees Rip's awe and apprehension subsided. He even ventured, when no eye was fixed upon him, to taste the beverage which he found had much of the flavour of excellent Hollands.¹³ He was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another; and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined, and he fell into a deep sleep.

On waking, he found himself on the green knoll whence he had first seen the old man of the glen. He rubbed his eyes—it was a bright sunny morning. The birds were hopping and twittering among the bushes, and the eagle was wheeling aloft, and breasting the pure mountain breeze. 'Surely,' thought Rip, 'I have not slept here all night.' He recalled the occurrences before he fell asleep. The strange man with a keg of liquor—the mountain ravine—the wild retreat among the rocks—the woebegone party at nine-pins¹⁴—the flagon—'Oh! that flagon! that wicked flagon!' thought Rip; 'what excuse shall I make to Dame Van Winkle?'

He looked round for his gun, but in place of the clean well-oiled fowling-piece he found an old firelock¹⁵ lying by him, the barrel encrusted with rust, the lock falling off, and the stock worm-eaten. He now suspected that the grave roysterers of the mountain had put a trick upon him and, having dosed him with liquor, had robbed him of his gun. Wolf, too, had disappeared, but he might have strayed away after a squirrel or partridge. He whistled after him, and shouted his name, but all in vain; the echoes repeated his whistle and shout, but no dog was to be seen.

He determined to revisit the scene of the last evening's gambol, and, if he met with any of the party, to demand his dog and gun. As he rose to walk, he found himself stiff in the joints and wanting in his usual activity. 'These mountain beds do not agree with me,' thought Rip 'and if this frolic should lay me up with a fit of the rheumatism, I shall have a blessed time with Dame Van Winkle.' With some difficulty he got down into the glen: he found the gully up which he and his companion had ascended the preceding evening; but to his astonishment, a mountain stream was now foaming down it—leaping from rock to rock, and filling the glen with babbling murmurs. He, however, made shift to scramble up its sides, working his toilsome way through thickets of birch, sassafras, and witch-hazel, and sometimes tripped up or entangled by the wild grape-vines that twisted their coils or tendrils from tree to tree, and spread a kind of network in his path.

At length he reached to where the ravine had opened through the cliffs to the amphitheatre; but no traces of such opening remained. The rocks presented a high impenetrable wall, over which the torrent came tumbling in a sheet of feathery foam, and fell into a broad deep basin, black from the shadows of the surrounding forest. Here, then, poor Rip was brought to a stand. He again called and whistled

after his dog, he was only answered by the cawing of a flock of idle crows, sporting high in air about a dry tree that overhung a sunny precipice; and who, secure in their elevation, seemed to look down and scoff at the poor man's perplexities. What was to be done?—the morning was passing away, and Rip felt famished for want of his breakfast. He grieved to give up his dog and gun; he dreaded to meet his wife; but it would not do to starve among the mountains. He shook his head, shouldered the rusty firelock, and, with a heart full of trouble and anxiety, turned his steps homeward.

As he approached the village he met a number of people, but none whom he knew, which somewhat surprised him, for he had thought himself acquainted with every one in the country round. Their dress, too, was of a different fashion from that to which he was accustomed. They all stared at him with equal marks of surprise, and, whenever they cast their eyes upon him, invariably stroked their chins. The constant recurrence of this gesture induced Rip, involuntarily, to do the same—when, to his astonishment, he found his beard had grown a foot long.

He had now entered the skirts of the village. A troop of strange children ran at his heels, hooting after him, and pointing at his grey beard. The dogs, too, not one of which he recognized for an old acquaintance, barked at him as he passed. The very village was altered; it was larger and more populous. There were rows of houses which he had never seen before, and those which had been his familiar haunts had disappeared. Strange names were over the doors—strange faces at the windows—everything was strange. His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched. Surely this was his native village, which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains—there

ran the silver Hudson at a distance—there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been. Rip was sorely perplexed. 'That flagon last night,' thought he, 'has addled my poor head sadly !'

It was with some difficulty that he found the way to his own house, which he approached with silent awe, expecting every moment to hear the shrill voice of Dame Van Winkle. He found the house gone to decay—the roof fallen in, the windows shattered, and the doors off the hinges. A half-starved dog, that looked like Wolf, was skulking about it. Rip called him by name, but the cur snarled, showed his teeth, and passed on. This was an unkind cut indeed—'My very dog,' sighed poor Rip, 'has forgotten me !'

He entered the house, which, to tell the truth, Dame Van Winkle had always kept in neat order. It was empty, forlorn, and apparently abandoned. The desolateness overcame all his connubial fears—he called loudly for his wife and children—the lonely chambers rang for a moment with his voice, and then all again was silence.

He now hurried forth, and hastened to his old resort, the village inn—but it too was gone. A large rickety wooden building stood in its place, with great gaping windows, some of them broken and mended with old hats and petticoats, and over the door was painted 'The Union Hotel, by Jonathan Doolittle.' Instead of the great tree that used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore, there now was reared a tall naked pole, with something on the top that looked like a red nightcap, and from it was fluttering a flag, on which was a singular assemblage of stars and stripes—all this was strange and incomprehensible. He recognized on the sign, however, the ruby face of King George, under which he had smoked so many a peaceful pipe ; but even this was singularly metamorphosed. The red coat was changed for one of blue and buff, a sword was held in the

hand instead of a sceptre, the head was decorated with a cocked hat, and underneath was painted in large characters, General Washington.¹⁶

There was, as usual, a crowd of folk about the door, but none that Rip recollected. The very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity. He looked in vain for the sage Nicholas Vedder, with his broad face, double chin, and fair long pipe, uttering clouds of tobacco smoke instead of the idle speeches; or Van Bummel, the schoolmaster, doling forth the contents of an ancient newspaper. In place of these, a lean, bilious-looking fellow, with his pockets full of handbills, was haranguing vehemently about rights of citizens—elections—members of Congress¹⁷—liberty—Bunker's Hill¹⁸—heroes of seventy-six¹⁹—and other words, which were a perfect Babylonish jargon to the bewildered Van Winkle.

The appearance of Rip, with his long grizzled beard, his rusty fowling-piece, his uncouth dress, and an army of women and children at his heels, soon attracted the attention of the tavern politicians. They crowded round him, eyeing him from head to foot with great curiosity. The orator bustled up to him, and, drawing him partly aside, inquired 'on which side he voted?' Rip stared in vacant stupidity. Another short but busy little fellow pulled him by the arm, and, rising on tiptoe, inquired in his ear 'Whether he was Federal or Democrat?'²⁰ Rip was equally at a loss to comprehend the question; when a knowing, self-important old gentleman, in a sharp cocked hat, made his way through the crowd, putting them to the right and left with his elbows as he passed, and planting himself before Van Winkle, with one arm akimbo, the other resting on his cane, his keen eyes and sharp hat penetrating, as it were, into his very soul, demanded in an austere tone, 'What brought

him to the election with a gun on his shoulder, and a mob at his heels, and whether he meant to breed a riot in the village?—‘Alas! gentleman,’ cried Rip, somewhat dismayed, ‘I am a poor quiet man, a native of the place, and a loyal subject of the king, God bless him!’

• Here a general shout burst from the bystanders—‘A tory,²¹ a tory! a spy! a refugee! hustle him! away with him!’ It was with great difficulty that the self-important man in the cocked hat restored order; and, having assumed a tenfold austerity of brow, demanded again of the unknown culprit, what he came there for, and whom he was seeking? The poor man humbly assured him that he meant no harm, but merely came there in search of some of his neighbours, who used to keep about the tavern.

‘Well—who are they?—name them.’

Rip bethought himself a moment and inquired,

‘Where’s Nicholas Vedder?’

There was a silence for a little while, when an old man replied in a thin piping voice, ‘Nicholas Vedder! why, he is dead and gone these eighteen years! There was a wooden tombstone in the churchyard that used to tell all about him, but that’s rotten and gone too.’

‘Where’s Brom Dutcher?’

‘Oh, he went off to the army in the beginning of the war; some say he was killed at the storming of Stony Point—others say he was drowned in a squall at the foot of Antony’s Nose. I don’t know—he never came back again.’

‘Where’s Van Bummel, the schoolmaster?’

‘He went off to the wars too, was a great militia general, and is now in Congress.’

Rip’s heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he

could not understand: war—Congress—Stony Point;—he had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair, ‘Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?’

‘Oh, Rip Van Winkle!’ exclaimed two or three, ‘Oh, to be sure! that’s Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree.’

Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name?

‘God knows,’ exclaimed he, at his wit’s end; ‘I’m not myself—I’m somebody else—that’s me yonder—no—that’s somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they’ve changed my gun, and everything’s changed, and I’m changed, and I can’t tell what’s my name, or who I am!’

The bystanders began now to look at each other, nod, wink significantly, and tap their fingers against their foreheads. There was a whisper, also, about securing the gun, and keeping the old fellow from doing mischief, at the very suggestion of which the self-important man in the cocked hat retired with some precipitation. At this critical moment a fresh comely woman pressed through the throng to get a peep at the grey-bearded man. She had a chubby child in her arms, which, frightened at his looks, began to cry. ‘Hush, Rip,’ cried she, ‘hush, you little fool; the old man won’t hurt you.’ The name of the child, the air of the mother, the tone of her voice, all awakened a train of recollections in his mind.

‘What is your name, my good woman?’ asked he.

‘Judith Gardiner.’

‘And your father’s name?’

‘Ah, poor man, Rip Van Winkle was his name, but it’s twenty years since he went away from home with his gun, and never has been heard of since—his dog came home without him; but whether he shot himself, or was carried away by the Indians, nobody can tell. “I was then but a little girl.”’

Rip had but one question more to ask; but he put it with a faltering voice:

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘Oh, she too had died but a short time since; she broke a blood-vessel in a fit of passion at a New England pedler.’

There was a drop of comfort, at least, in this intelligence. The honest man could contain himself no longer. He caught his daughter and her child in his arms. ‘I am your father!’ cried he—‘Young Rip Van Winkle once—old Rip Van Winkle now!—Does nobody know poor Rip Van Winkle?’

All stood amazed, until an old woman, tottering out from among the crowd, put her hand to her brow, and peering under it in his face for a moment, exclaimed, ‘Sure enough! it is Rip Van Winkle—it is himself! Welcome home again, old neighbour—Why, where have you been these twenty long years?’

Rip’s story was soon told, for the whole twenty years had been to him but as one night. The neighbours stared when they heard it; some were seen to wink at each other, and put their tongues in their cheeks; and the self-important man in the cocked hat, who, when the alarm was over, had returned to the field, screwed down the corners of his mouth, and shook his head—upon which there was a general shaking of the head throughout the assemblage.

It was determined, however, to take the opinion of old Peter Vanderdonk, who was seen slowly advancing

up the road. He was a descendant of the historian of that name, who wrote one of the earliest accounts of the province. Peter was the most ancient inhabitant of the village, and well versed in all the wonderful events and traditions of the neighbourhood. He recollected Rip at once, and corroborated his story in the most satisfactory manner. He assured the company that it was a fact, handed down from his ancestor the historian, that the Kaatskill mountains had always been haunted by strange beings. That it was affirmed that the great Hendrick Hudson, the first discoverer of the river and country, kept a kind of vigil there every twenty years, with his crew of the Half-moon; being permitted in this way to revisit the scenes of his enterprise, and keep a guardian eye upon the river, and the great city called by his name. That his father had once seen them in their old Dutch dresses playing at nine-pins in a hollow of the mountain; and that he himself had heard, one summer afternoon, the sound of their balls, like distant peals of thunder.

To make a long story short, the company broke up, and returned to the more important concerns of the election. Rip's daughter took him home to live with her; she had a snug, well-furnished house, and a stout cheery farmer for her husband, whom Rip recollected for one of the urchins that used to climb upon his back. As to Rip's son and heir, who was the ditto of himself, seen leaning against the tree, he was employed to work on the farm; but evinced an hereditary disposition to attend to everything else but his business.

Rip now resumed his old walks and habits; he soon found many of his former cronies, though all rather the worse for the wear and tear of time; and preferred making friends among the rising generation, with whom he soon grew into great favour.

Having nothing to do at home, and being arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity, he took his place once more on the bench at the inn door, and was revered as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times 'before the war.' It was some time before he could get into the regular track of gossip, or could be made to comprehend the strange events that had taken place during his torpor. How that there had been a revolutionary war—that the country had thrown off the yoke of old England—and that, instead of being a subject of his Majesty George the Third, he was now a free citizen of the United States. Rip, in fact, was no politician; the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him; but, there was one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was—petticoat government. Happily that was at an end; he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame Van Winkle. Whenever her name was mentioned, however, he shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and cast up his eyes; which might pass either for an expression of resignation to his fate, or joy at his deliverance.

He used to tell his story to every stranger that arrived at Mr. Doolittle's hotel. He was observed, at first, to vary on some points every time he told it, which was, doubtless, owing to his having so recently awaked. It at last settled down precisely to the tale I have related, and not a man, woman, or child in the neighbourhood but knew it by heart. Some always pretended to doubt the reality of it, and insisted that Rip had been out of his head, and that this was one point on which he always remained flighty. The old Dutch inhabitants, however, almost universally gave it full credit. Even to this day they never hear a thunder-

storm of a summer afternoon about the Kaatskill, but they say Hendrick Hudson and his crew are at their game of nine-pins; and it is a common wish of all hen-pecked husbands in the neighbourhood, when life hangs heavy on their hands, that they might have a quieting draught out of Rip Van Winkle's flagon.

NOTES.

(These notes are only intended to supplement a good dictionary—say the Concise Oxford Dictionary).

This story is a legend of New York (State, not City which, of course, is on an island off the coast of the mainland), in the interior of which, along the banks of the Hudson River, a small colony of Dutchmen had settled. Besides the English colonists a considerable number of Frenchmen and Dutchmen were among the early settlers in America, and they naturally found homes near each other. This congregation of small groups of nationalities is observed even to-day in American cities. In its human and easy, graceful language Rip Van Winkle is near the best of Irving's work.

¹ *Diedrich Knickerbocker*: A fantastic Dutch name, invented by Irving, and the actual source of the subsequent name for loose fitting knee-breeches then worn by men.

² *Thylke*: The same (Old English *c.f.* "ilk.")

³ *Hudson, Kaatskill*: It is worth looking up the positions of this river and these mountains in a map of America.

⁴ *Shingle-roofs*: Roofs made of rectangular slips of wood instead of tiles.

⁵ *Peter Stuyvesant*: A Dutch Colonial Governor. After serving in India and elsewhere in the East he went to New Amsterdam (now New York) in 1697. He was a great enthusiast for Colonial independence, and that and his lack of success in fights with both the Swedish and English colonists led to his recall. Eventually he went back and settled quietly on his farm, the Bouwerie, from which is named the Bowery district of modern New York, a great slum and criminal area in that city.

⁶ *Shoot marbles*: To flick them.

⁷ *Skirts*: The bottom of his coat, or the tails. Coats at that time were worn long. Not women's skirts.

⁸ *Tartar's lance*: The Tartars were the inhabitants of a huge, vague tract of Central Asia, called Tartary by mediæval Europe. After the exploits of Jenghiz Khan and Kublai Khan and their successes, the Tartars had an almost fabulous reputation for fighting powers, strength, and cruelty. They were originally a Mongolian people; among them were grouped the Turks and Russian Cossacks.

⁹ *White bread or brown*: White bread has long been reckoned superior but perhaps not so much to-day when doctors say that bleaching flour also robs it of vitamins!

¹⁰ *By chance an old newspaper fell into their hands from some passing traveller* : These were days before railways, motor cars, or even good roads or before newspapers existed in any quantity and people who could afford to buy them. In such a localised, cut off community legends started easily and stayed long.

¹¹ *Thy mistress* : Thou, thee, thy and the verbs wilt, shalt were singular forms of the second person and used for familiarity. The plural, ye (now you) was respectful.

¹² *Flemish painting* : Flemish is used of an inhabitant of Flanders or the Low Countries, the modern kingdoms of Belgium and Holland.

¹³ *Hollands* : Gin, a spirit made from grain.

¹⁴ *Nine-pins* : Skittles, a game with nine-pins or wooden pegs.

¹⁵ *Firelock* : A musket in which the priming was ignited by sparks struck from steel on flint. It was later than and an improvement on the matchlock, in which the powder had to be ignited by an actual match (in days before there were handy boxes of phosphorous matches); but still primitive compared to a modern rifle in which the detonating powder is exploded by percussion.

¹⁶ *General Washington* : The greatest general and leader in the struggle for independence, and the first president of the new Republic.

¹⁷ *Congress* : The Legislative Assembly of America.

¹⁸ *Bunker's Hill* : The first battle of the war, with victory to the colonists.

¹⁹ *1776* : The year of the Declaration of Independence, leading to a seven years' struggle.

²⁰ *Federal or Democrat* : One of the great problems facing the builders of the New State, after the War of Independence was successfully concluded, was how far the union of the separate Colonies and States, so far joined in a determination to resist at all costs the claim of Britain to impose taxes on them, should be complete, with all the power of ruling vested in a Central Government, or simply a loose confederation of largely, Independent States. The latter view was that of the Democrat party, the former of the Federal (later Whig, now Republican) party. The parties were divided in the Civil War of later years as much on this issue as on that of slavery, which the cotton-growing states of the south, where the Democrats were strong, wished to keep, and the northern states, where the Republicans were most numerous, wished to abolish: although many Democrats refused to countenance negro slavery. The Democrats, curiously enough, have always been the more truly and widely democratic and republican in their ideas.

²¹ *Tory* : Roughly one who supported the authority of the Crown opposed to "whig," one who desired the subordination of the Crown to Parliament, terms approximately equivalent to 'conservative' and 'liberal' in later politics.

FEATHERTOP: A MORALIZED, LEGEND

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

1804-1864

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in America in 1804, and like Irving he spent some years of his life in Europe, in England and Italy. He went back to his own country to die in 1864. He was another man whose contemporary reputation was far greater than his posthumous, and he has proved to be a very second-rate author. In particular his moralising sentimentality has thrown him out of favour with modern readers: notice the subtitle of even this tale, and occasional sententious remarks about behaviour in it. He re-wrote many old Greek myths in collections called "A Wonder-Book" and "The Tanglewood Tales," and the best of his short stories are in "Mosses from an Old Manse."

'DICKON,' cried Mother Rigby, 'a coal for my pipe.'

The pipe was in the old dame's mouth when she said these words. She had thrust it there after filling it with tobacco, but without stooping to light it at the hearth, where indeed there was no appearance of a fire having been kindled that morning. Forthwith, however, as soon as the order was given, there was an intense red glow out of the bowl of the pipe, and a whiff of smoke from Mother Rigby's lips. Whence the coal came, and how brought thither by an invisible hand, I have never been able to discover.

'Good!' quoth Mother Rigby, with a nod of her head. 'Thank ye, Dickon! And now for making this scarecrow. Be within call, Dickon, in case I need you again.'

The good woman had risen thus early (for as yet it was scarcely sunrise) in order to set about making a scarecrow, which she intended to put in the middle of her corn-patch. It was now the latter week of May, and the crows and blackbirds had already discovered the little, green,

rolled-up leaf of the Indian-corn just peeping out of the soil. She was determined, therefore, to contrive as life-like a scarecrow as ever was seen, and to finish it immediately, from top to toe, so that it should begin its sentinel's duty that very morning. Now Mother Rigby (as everybody must have heard) was one of the most cunning and potent witches in New England, and might, with very little trouble, have made a scarecrow ugly enough to frighten the minister himself. But on this occasion, as she had awakened in an uncommonly pleasant humour, and was further dulcified by her pipe of tobacco, she resolved to produce something fine, beautiful, and splendid, rather than hideous and horrible.

'I don't want to set up a hobgoblin in my own corn-
patch, and almost at my own doorstep,' said Mother Rigby to herself, puffing out a whiff of smoke ; 'I could do it if I pleased, but I'm tired of doing marvellous things, and so I'll keep within the bounds of everyday business, just for variety's sake. Besides, there is no use in scaring the little children for a mild roundabout, though 'tis true I'm a witch.'

It was settled, therefore, in her own mind, that the scarecrow should represent a fine gentleman of the period, so far as the materials at hand would allow. Perhaps it may be as well to enumerate the chief of the articles that went to the composition of this figure.

The most important item of all, probably, although it made so little show, was a certain broomstick,² on which Mother Rigby had taken many an airy gallop at midnight, and which now served the scarecrow by way of a spinal column, or, as the unlearned phrase it, a backbone. One of its arms was a disabled flail, which used to be wielded by Goodman Rigby, before his spouse worried him out of this troublesome world ; the other, if I mistake

not, was composed of the pudding stick, and a broken rung of a chair, tied loosely together at the elbow. As for its legs, the right was a hoe handle, and the left an undistinguished and miscellaneous stick from the wood-pile. Its lungs, stomach, and other affairs of that kind were nothing better than a meal bag stuffed with straw. Thus we have made out the skeleton and entire corporeity of the scarecrow, with the exception of its head, and this was admirably supplied by a somewhat withered and shrivelled pumpkin, in which Mother Rigby cut two holes for the eyes, and a slit for the mouth, leaving a bluish-coloured knob in the middle to pass for a nose. It was really quite a respectable face.

‘I’ve seen worse ones on human shoulders, at any rate,’ said Mother Rigby. ‘And many a fine gentleman has a pumpkin-head³ as well as my scarecrow.’

But the clothes, in this case, were to be the making of the man. So the good old woman took down from a peg an ancient plum-coloured coat of London-make, and with relics of embroidery on its seams, cuffs, pocket flaps, and button-holes, but lamentably worn and faded, patched at the elbows, tattered at the skirts, and threadbare all over. On the left breast was a round hole, whence either a star of nobility had been rent away, or else the hot heart of some former wearer had scorched it through and through. The neighbours said that this rich garment belonged to the Black Man’s⁴ wardrobe, and that he kept it at Mother Rigby’s cottage for the convenience of slipping it on whenever he wished to make a grand appearance at the governor’s table. To match the coat there was a velvet waistcoat of very ample size and formerly embroidered with foliage that had been as brightly golden as the maple leaves in October, but which had now quite vanished out of the substance of the velvet. Next came a pair of

scarlet breeches, once worn by the French governor of Louisbourg⁵ and the knees of which had touched the lower step of the throne of Louis le Grand. The Frenchman had given these small clothes to an Indian powwow, who had parted with them to the old witch for a gill of strong waters, at one of their dances in the forest. Furthermore, Mother Rigby produced a pair of silk stockings and put them on the figure's legs, where they showed as unsubstantial as a dream, with the wooden reality of the two sticks making itself miserably apparent through the holes. Lastly, she put her dead husband's wig on the bare scalp of the pumpkin, and surmounted the whole with a dusty three-cornered hat, in which was stuck the longest tail feather of a rooster.

Then the old dame stood the figure up in a corner of her cottage and chuckled to behold its yellow semblance of a visage, with its nobby little nose thrust into the air. It had a strangely self-satisfied aspect, and seemed to say, 'Come, look at me!'

'And you are well worth looking at, that's a fact!' quoth Mother Rigby, in admiration at her own handiwork. 'I've made many a puppet since I've been a witch; but methinks this is the finest of them all. 'Tis almost too good for a scarecrow. And, by the by, I'll just fill a fresh pipe of tobacco, and then take him out to the cornpatch.'

While filling her pipe, the old woman continued to gaze with almost motherly affection at the figure in the corner. To say the truth, whether it was chance, or skill, or downright witchcraft, there was something wonderfully human in this ridiculous shape, bedizened with its tattered finery; and as for the countenance, it appeared to shrivel its yellow surface into a grin—a funny kind of expression betwixt scorn and merriment, as if it understood itself to

be a jest at mankind. The more Mother Rigby looked the better she was pleased.

'Dickon,' cried she sharply, 'another coal for my pipe!'

Hardly had she spoken, than, just as before, there was a red glowing coal on the top of the tobacco. She drew in a long whiff and puffed it forth again into the bar of morning sunshine which struggled through the one dusty pane of her cottage window. Mother Rigby always liked to flavour her pipe with a coal of fire from the particular chimney-corner whence this had been brought. But where that chimney-corner might be, or who brought the coal from it—further than that the invisible messenger seemed to respond to the name of Dickon—I cannot tell.

'That puppet yonder,' thought Mother Rigby, still with her eyes fixed on the scarecrow, 'is too good a piece of work to stand all summer in a corn-patch, frightening away the crows and blackbirds. He's capable of better things. Why, I've danced with a worse one, when partners happened to be scarce, at our witch meetings in the forest! What if I should let him take his chance among the other men of straw and empty fellows who go bustling about the world?'

The old witch took three or four more whiffs of her pipe and smiled.

'He'll meet plenty of his brethren at every street corner!' continued she. 'Well; I didn't mean to dabble in witchcraft to-day, further than the lighting of my pipe; but a witch I am, and a witch I'm likely to be, and there's no use trying to shirk it. I'll make a man of my scarecrow, were it only for the joke's sake!'

While muttering these words Mother Rigby took the pipe from her own mouth and thrust it into the crevice which represented the same feature in the pumpkin visage of the scarecrow.

'Puff, darling, puff!' said she. 'Puff away, my fine fellow! your life depends on it!'

This was a strange exhortation, undoubtedly, to be addressed to a mere nothing of sticks, straw, and old clothes, with nothing better than a shrivelled pumpkin for a head; as we know to have been the scarecrow's case. Nevertheless, as we must carefully hold in remembrance, Mother Rigby was a witch of singular power and dexterity; and, keeping this fact duly before our minds, we shall see nothing beyond credibility in the remarkable incidents of our story. Indeed, the great difficulty will be at once got over, if we can only bring ourselves to believe that, as soon as the old dame bade him puff, there came a whiff of smoke from the scarecrow's mouth. It was the very feeblest of whiffs, to be sure; but it was followed by another, and another, each more decided than the preceding one.

'Puff away, my pet! puff away, my pretty one!' Mother Rigby kept repeating with her pleasantest smile. 'It is the breath of life to ye; and that you may take my word for.'

Beyond all question the pipe was bewitched. There must have been a spell either in the tobacco or in the fiercely-glowing coal that so mysteriously burned on the top of it, or in the pungently-aromatic smoke which exhaled from the kindled weed. The figure, after a few doubtful attempts, at length blew forth a volley of smoke extending all the way from the obscure corner into the bar of sunshine. There it eddied and melted away among the motes of dust. It seemed a convulsive effort; for the two or three next whiffs were fainter, although the coal still glowed and threw a gleam over the scarecrow's visage. The old witch clapped her skinny hands together, and smiled encouragingly upon her handiwork. She saw that the charm worked well. The shrivelled, yellow face, which heretofore had been no face

at all, had already a thin, fantastic haze, as it were, of human likeness, shifting to and fro across it ; sometimes vanishing entirely, but growing more perceptible than ever with the next whiff from the pipe. The whole figure, in a like manner, assumed a show of life, such as we impart to ill-defined shapes among the clouds, and half deceive ourselves with the pastime of our own fancy.

If we must needs pry closely into the matter, it may be doubted whether there was any real change, after all, in the sordid, worn-out, worthless, and ill-jointed substance of the scarecrow, but merely a spectral illusion, and a cunning effect of light and shade so coloured and contrived as to delude the eyes of most men. The miracles of witchcraft seem always to have had a very shallow subtlety : and, at least, if the above explanation does not hit the truth of the process, I can suggest no better.

‘Well puffed, my pretty lad !’ still cried old Mother Rigby. ‘Come another good stout whiff, and let it be with might and main. Puff for thy life, I tell thee ! Puff out of the very bottom of thy heart, if any heart thou hast, or any bottom to it ! Well done, again ! Thou didst suck in that mouthful as if for the pure love of it.’

And then the witch beckoned to the scarecrow, throwing so much magnetic potency into her gesture that it seemed as if it must inevitably be obeyed, like the mystic call of the lodestone when it summons the iron.

‘Why lurkest thou in the corner, lazy one ?’ said she. ‘Step forth ! Thou hast the world before thee !’

Upon my word, if the legend were not one which I heard on my grandmother’s knee, and which had established its place among things credible before my childish judgment could analyse its probability, I question whether I should have the face to tell it now.

In obedience to Mother Rigby’s word, and extending

its arm as if to reach her outstretched hand, the figure made a step forward—a kind of hitch and jerk, however, rather than a step,—then tottered and almost lost its balance. What could the witch expect? It was nothing, after all, but a scarecrow stuck upon two sticks. But the strong-willed old beldam scowled, and beckoned, and flung the energy of her purpose so forcibly at this poor combination of rotten wood, and musty straw, and ragged garments, that it was compelled to show itself a man, in spite of the reality of things. So it stepped into the bar of sunshine. There it stood—poor devil of a contrivance that it was!—with only the thinnest vesture of human similitude about it, through which was evident the stiff, rickety, incongruous, faded, tattered, good-for-nothing patchwork of its substance, ready to sink in a heap upon the floor, as conscious of its own unworthiness to be erect. Shall I confess the truth? At its present point of vivification, the scarecrow reminds me of some of the lukewarm and abortive characters, composed of heterogeneous materials, used for the thousandth time, and never worth using, with which romance writers (and myself, no doubt, among the rest) have so overpeopled the world of fiction.

But the fierce old hag began to get angry and show a glimpse of her diabolic nature (like a snake's head, peeping with a hiss out of her bosom), at this pusillanimous behaviour of the thing which she had taken the trouble to put together.

'Puff away, wretch!' cried she, wrathfully. 'Puff, puff, puff, thou thing of straw and emptiness! thou rag or two! thou meal bag! thou pumpkin head! thou nothing! Where shall I find a name vile enough to call thee by? Puff, I say, and suck in thy fantastic life along with the smoke! else I snatch the pipe from thy mouth, and hurl thee where that red coal came from.'

Thus threatened, the unhappy scarecrow had nothing

for it but to puff away for dear life. As need was, therefore, it applied itself lustily to the pipe and sent forth such abundant volleys of tobacco-smoke that the small kitchen became all vaporous. The one sunbeam struggled mistily through, and could but imperfectly define the image of the cracked and dusty window pane on the opposite wall. Mother Rigby, meanwhile, with one brown arm akimbo and the other stretched towards the figure, loomed grimly amid the obscurity with such port and expression as when she was wont to heave a ponderous nightmare on her victims and stand at the bedside to enjoy their agony. In fear and trembling did this poor scarecrow puff. But its efforts, it must be acknowledged, served an excellent purpose, for, with each successive whiff, the figure lost more and more of its dizzy and perplexing tenuity and seemed to take denser substance. Its very garments, moreover, partook of the magical change, and shone with the gloss of novelty and glistened with the skilfully embroidered gold that had long been rent away. And, half revealed among the smoke, a yellow visage bent its lustreless eyes on Mother Rigby.

At last the old witch clinched her fist and shook it at the figure. Not that she was positively angry, but merely acting on the principle—perhaps untrue, or not the only truth, though as high a one as Mother Rigby could be expected to attain—that feeble and torpid natures, being incapable of better inspiration, must be stirred up by fear. But here was the crisis. Should she fail in what she now sought to effect, it was her ruthless purpose to scatter the miserable simulacrum into its original elements.

‘Thou hast a man’s aspect,’ said she, sternly. ‘Have also the echo and mockery of a voice! I bid thee speak!’

The scarecrow gasped, struggled, and at length emitted a murmur, which was so incorporated with its smoky breath that you could scarcely tell whether it were indeed a voice

or only a whiff of tobacco? Some narrators of this legend hold the opinion that Mother Rigby's conjurations and the fierceness of her will had compelled a familiar spirit into the figure, and that the voice was his.

'Mother,' mumbled the poor stifled voice, 'be not so awful with me! I would fain speak, but being without wits, what can I say?'

'Thou canst speak, darling, canst thou?' cried Mother Rigby, relaxing her grim countenance into a smile. 'And what shalt thou say, quotha! Say, indeed! Art thou of the brotherhood of the empty skull, and demandest of me what thou shalt say? Thou shalt say a thousand things, and saying them a thousand times over, thou shalt still have said nothing! Be not afraid, I tell thee! When thou comest into the world (whither I purpose sending thee forthwith), thou shalt not lack the wherewithal to talk. Talk! Why, thou shalt babble like a mill-stream, if thou wilt. Thou hast brains enough for that, I trow!'

'At your service, mother,' responded the figure.

'And that was well said, my pretty one,' answered Mother Rigby. 'Then thou speakest like thyself and meant nothing. Thou shalt have a hundred such set phrases, and five hundred to the boot⁶ of them. And now, darling, I have taken so much pains with thee, and thou art so beautiful, that, by my troth, I love thee better than any witch's puppet in the world; and I've made them of all sorts—clay, wax, straw, sticks, night fog, morning mist, sea foam, and chimney smoke. But thou art the very best. So give heed to what I say.'

'Yes, kind mother,' said the figure, 'with all my heart!'

'With all thy heart!' cried the old witch, setting her hands to her sides and laughing loudly. 'Thou hast such a pretty way of speaking. With all thy heart! And thou

didst put thy hand to the left side of thy waistcoat, as if thou really hadst one !'

So now, in high good humour with this fantastic contrivance of hers, Mother Rigby told the scarecrow that it must go and play its part in the great world, where not one man in a hundred, she affirmed, was gifted with more real substance than itself. And, that he might hold up his head with the best of them, she endowed him, on the spot, with an unreckonable amount of wealth. It consisted partly of a gold mine in Eldorado,⁷ and of ten thousand shares in a broken bubble,⁸ and of half a million acres of vineyard at the North Pole, and of a castle in the air, and a chateau in Spain,⁹ together with all the rents and income therefrom accruing. She further made over to him the cargo of a certain ship, laden with salt of Cadiz,¹⁰ which she herself, by her necromantic arts, had caused to founder, ten years before, in the deepest part of mid-ocean. If the salt were not dissolved, and could be brought to market, it would fetch a pretty penny among the fishermen. That he might not lack ready money, she gave him a copper farthing of Birmingham manufacture¹¹ being all the coin she had about her, and likewise a great deal of brass, which she applied to his forehead, thus making it yellower than ever.

'With that brass alone,' quoth Mother Rigby, 'thou canst pay thy way all over the earth. Kiss me, pretty darling ! I have done my best for thee.'

Furthermore, that the adventurer might lack no possible advantage towards a fair start in life, this excellent old dame gave him a token by which he was to introduce himself to a certain magistrate, member of the council, merchant, and elder of the church (the four capacities constituting but one man), who stood at the head of society in the neighbouring metropolis. The token was neither more nor less than a single word, which Mother Rigby whispered to the

scarecrow, and which the scarecrow was to whisper to the merchant.

‘Gouty as the old fellow is, he’ll run thy errands for thee when once thou hast given him that word in his ear, said the old witch. ‘Mother Rigby knows the worshipful Justice Gookin, and the worshipful Justice knows Mother Rigby!’

Here the witch thrust her wrinkled face close to the puppet’s, chuckling irrepressibly, and fidgeting all through her system, with delight at the idea which she meant to communicate.

‘The worshipful Master Gookin,’ whispered she, ‘hath a comely maiden to his daughter. And hark ye, my pet! Thou hast a fair outside, and a pretty wit enough of thine own. Yea, a pretty wit enough! Thou wilt think better of it when thou hast seen more of other people’s wits. Now, with thy outside and thy inside, thou art the very man to win a young girl’s heart. Never doubt it! I tell thee it shall be so. Put but a bold face on the matter, sigh, smile, flourish thy hat, thrust forth thy leg like a dancing master, put thy right hand to the left side of thy waistcoat, and pretty Polly Gookin is thine own!’

All this while the new creature had been sucking in and exhaling the vapoury fragrance of his pipe, and seemed now to continue this occupation as much for the enjoyment it afforded as because it was an essential condition of his existence. It was wonderful to see how exceedingly like a human being it behaved. Its eyes (for it appeared to possess a pair) were bent on Mother Rigby, and at suitable junctures it nodded or shook its head. Neither did it lack words proper for the occasion: ‘Really! Indeed! Pray tell me! Is it possible! Upon my word! By no means! O! Ah! Hem!’ and other such weighty utterances as imply attention, inquiry, acquiescence, or dissent on the part of

the auditor. Even had you stood by and seen the scarecrow made you could scarcely have resisted the conviction that it perfectly understood the cunning counsels which the old witch poured into its counterfeit of an ear. The more earnestly it applied its lips to the pipe the more distinctly was its human likeness stamped among visible realities, the more sagacious grew its expression, the more lifelike its gestures and movements, and the more intelligibly audible its voice. Its garments, too, glistened so much the brighter with an illusory magnificence. The very pipe, in which burned the spell of all this wonder-work, ceased to appear as a smoke-blackened earthen stump, and became a meer-schaum,¹² with painted bowl and amber mouthpiece.

It might be apprehended, however, that as the life of the illusion seemed identical with the vapour of the pipe, it would terminate simultaneously with the reduction of the tobacco to ashes. But the beldam foresaw the difficulty.

‘Hold thou the pipe, my precious one,’ said she, ‘while I fill it for thee again.’

It was sorrowful to behold how the fine gentleman began to fade back into a scarecrow while Mother Rigby shook the ashes out of the pipe and proceeded to replenish it from her tobacco box.

‘Dickon,’ cried she, in her high, sharp tone, ‘another coal for this pipe!’

No sooner said than the intensely red speck of fire was glowing within the pipe bowl; and the scarecrow, without waiting for the witch’s bidding, applied the tube to his lips and drew in a few short, convulsive whiffs, which soon, however, became regular and equable.

‘Now, my own heart’s darling,’ quoth Mother Rigby, ‘whatever may happen to thee, thou must stick to thy pipe. Thy life is in it; and that, at least, thou knowest well, if thou knowest nought besides. Stick to thy pipe,

I say ! Smoke, puff, blow thy cloud : and tell the people, if any question be made, that it is for thy health, and that so the physician orders thee to do. And, sweet one, when thou shalt find thy pipe getting low, go apart into some corner, and (first filling thyself with smoke), cry sharply, "Dickon, a fresh pipe of tobacco !" and "Dickon, another coal for my pipe !" and have it into thy pretty mouth as speedily as may be. Else, instead of a gallant gentleman in a gold-laced coat, thou wilt be but a jumble of sticks and tattered clothes, and a bag of straw, and a withered pumpkin ! Now depart, my treasure, and good luck go with thee !'

'Never fear, mother !' said the figure, in a stout voice, and sending forth a courageous whiff of smoke. 'I will thrive, if an honest man and a gentleman may !'

'O, thou wilt be the death of me !' cried the old witch, convulsed with laughter. 'That was well said. If an honest man and a gentleman may ! Thou playest thy part to perfection. Get along with thee for a smart fellow ; and I will wager on thy head, as a man of pith and substance, with a brain, and what they call a heart, and all else that a man should have, against any other thing on two legs. I hold myself a better witch than yesterday, for thy sake. Did not I make thee ? And I defy any witch in New England to make such another ! Here ; take my staff along with thee !'

The staff, though it was but a plain oaken stick, immediately took the aspect of a gold-headed cane.

'That gold head has as much sense in it as thine own,' said Mother Rigby, 'and it will guide thee straight to worshipful Master Gookin's door. Get thee gone, my pretty pet, my darling, my precious one, my treasure ; and if any ask thy name, it is Feathertop. For thou hast a feather in thy hat, and I have thrust a handful of feathers into the

hollow of thy head, and thy wig too is of the fashion they call Feathertop—so be Feathertop thy name ! ’

And, issuing from the cottage, Feathertop strode manfully towards town. Mother Rigby stood at the threshold, well pleased to see how the sunbeams glistened on him, as if all his magnificence were real, and how diligently and lovingly he smoked his pipe, and how handsomely he walked, in spite of a little stiffness of his legs. She watched him until out of sight, and threw a witch benediction after her darling, when a turn of the road snatched him from her view.

Betimes in the forenoon, when the principal street of the neighbouring town was just at its acme of life and bustle, a stranger of very distinguished figure was seen on the sidewalk. His port as well as his garments betokened nothing short of nobility. He wore a richly-embroidered plum-coloured coat, a waistcoat of costly velvet magnificently adorned with golden foliage, a pair of splendid scarlet breeches, and the finest and glossiest of white silk stockings. His head was covered with a peruke, so daintily powdered and adjusted that it would have been sacrilege to disorder it with a hat ; which, therefore (and it was a gold-laced hat, set off with a snowy feather) he carried beneath his arm. On the breast of his coat glistened a star. He managed his gold-headed cane with an airy grace peculiar to the fine gentlemen of the period ; and to give the highest possible finish to his equipment, he had lace ruffles at his wrist, of a most ethereal delicacy, sufficiently avouching how idle and aristocratic must be the hands which they half concealed.

It was a remarkable point in the accoutrement of this brilliant personage that he held in his left hand a fantastic kind of pipe, with an exquisitely painted bowl and an amber mouthpiece. This he applied to his lips as often as every five or six paces, and inhaled a deep whiff of smoke, which,

after being retained a moment in his lungs, might be seen to eddy gracefully from his mouth and nostrils.

As may well be supposed, the street was all astir to find out the stranger's name.

'It is some great nobleman, beyond question,' said one of the townspeople. 'Do you see the star at his breast?'

'Nay; it is too bright to be seen,' said another. 'Yes; he must needs be a nobleman, as you say. But by what conveyance, think you, can his lordship have voyaged or travelled hither? There has been no vessel from the old old country ¹³ for a month past; and if he have arrived overland from the southward, pray where are his attendants and equipage?'

'He needs no equipage to set off his rank,' remarked a third. 'If he came among us in rags, nobility would shine through a hole in his elbow. I never saw such dignity of aspect. He has the old Norman blood in his veins, I warrant him.'

'I rather take him to be a Dutchman, or one of your high German,' said another citizen. 'The men of those countries have always the pipe at their mouths.'

'And so has a Turk,' answered his companion. 'But, in my judgment, this stranger hath been bred at the French court, and hath there learned politeness and grace of manner, which none understand so well as the nobility of France. That gait, now! A vulgar spectator might deem it stiff—he might call it a hitch and jerk—but, to my eye, it hath an unspeakable majesty, and must have been acquired by constant observation of the deportment of the Grand ¹⁴ Monarque. The stranger's character and office are evident enough. He is a French ambassador, come to treat with our rulers about the cession of Canada. ¹⁵

'More probably a Spaniard,' said another, 'and hence his yellow complexion; or, most likely, he is from the

Havana, or from some port on the Spanish Main, and comes to make investigation about the piracies which our governor is thought to connive at. Those settlers in Peru and Mexico have skins as yellow as the gold which they dig out of their mines.'

'Yellow or not,' cried a lady, 'he is a beautiful man!—so tall, so slender! such a fine, noble face, with so well shaped a nose, and all that delicacy of expression about the mouth! And, bless me, how bright his star is! It positively shoots out flames!'

'So do your eyes, fair lady,' said the stranger, with a bow and a flourish of his pipe; for he was just passing at the instant. 'Upon my honour, they have quite dazzled me.'

'Was ever so original and exquisite a compliment?' murmured the lady in an ecstasy of delight.

Amid the general admiration excited by the stranger's appearance there were only two dissenting voices. One was that of an impertinent cur, which, after snuffing at the heels of the glistening figure, put its tail between its legs and skulked into its master's backyard, vociferating an execrable howl. The other dissentient was a young child, who squalled at the fullest stretch of his lungs, and babbled some unintelligible nonsense about a pumpkin.

Feathertop meanwhile pursued his way along the street. Except for the few complimentary words to the lady and now and then a slight inclination of the head in requital of the profound reverences of the bystanders, he seemed wholly absorbed in his pipe. There needed no other proof of his rank and consequence than the perfect equanimity with which he comported himself, while the curiosity and admiration of the town swelled almost into clamour around him. With a crowd gathering behind his footsteps, he finally reached the mansion house of the worshipful Justice Gookin, entered the gate, ascended the steps of the front door, and

knocked. In the interim, before his summons was answered, the stranger was observed to shake the ashes out of his pipe.

‘What did he say in that sharp voice?’ inquired one of the spectators.

‘Nay, I know not,’ answered his friend. ‘But the sun dazzles my eyes strangely. How dim and faded his lordship looks all of a sudden! Bless my wits, what is the matter with me?’

‘The wonder is,’ said the other, ‘that his pipe which was out only an instant ago, should be all alight again, and with the reddest coal I ever saw. There is something mysterious about this stranger. What a whiff of smoke was that! Dim and faded did you call him? Why, as he turns about the star on his breast is all ablaze.’

‘It is, indeed,’ said his companion, ‘and it will go near to dazzle pretty Polly Gookin, whom I see peeping at it out of the chamber window.’

The door being now opened, Feathertop turned to the crowd, made a stately bend of his body like a great man acknowledging the reverence of the meaner sort, and vanished into the house. There was a mysterious kind of a smile, if it might not be better called a grin or grimace, upon his visage; but, of all the throng that beheld him, not an individual appears to have possessed insight enough to detect the illusive character of the stranger except a little child and a cur dog.

Our legend here loses somewhat of its continuity, and, passing over the preliminary explanation between Feathertop and the merchant, goes in quest of the pretty Polly Gookin. She was a damsel of a soft, round figure, with light hair and blue eyes, and a fair, rosy face, which seemed neither very shrewd nor very simple. This young lady had caught a glimpse of the glistening stranger while standing at the threshold, and had forthwith put on a laced cap, a string of

beads, her finest kerchief, and her stiffest damask petticoat in preparation for the interview. Hurrying from her chamber to the parlour, she had ever since been viewing herself in the large looking-glass and practising pretty airs—now a smile, now a ceremonious dignity of aspect, and now a softer smile than the former, kissing her hand likewise, tossing her head, and managing her fan; while within the mirror an unsubstantial little maid repeated every gesture and did all the foolish things that Polly did, but without making her ashamed of them. In short, it was the fault of pretty Polly's ability rather than her will if she failed to be as complete an artifice as the illustrious Feathertop himself; and, when she thus tampered with her own simplicity, the witch's phantom might well hope to win her.

No sooner did Polly hear her father's gouty footsteps approaching the parlour door, accompanied with the stiff clatter of Feathertop's high-heeled shoes, than she seated herself bolt upright and innocently began warbling a song.

'Polly! daughter Polly!' cried the old merchant.
'Come hither, child.'

Master Gookin's aspect, as he opened the door, was doubtful and troubled.

'This gentleman,' continued he, presenting the stranger, 'is the Chevalier Feathertop,—nay, I beg his pardon, my Lord Feathertop,—who hath brought me a token of remembrance from an ancient friend of mine. Pay your duty to his lordship, child, and honour him as his quality deserves.'

After these few words of introduction the worshipful magistrate immediately quitted the room. But, even in that brief moment, had the fair Polly glanced aside at her father instead of devoting herself wholly to the brilliant guest, she might have taken warning of some mischief nigh at hand. The old man was nervous, fidgety, and very pale. Purposing a simile of courtesy, he had deformed his face

with a sort of galvanic grin, which, when Feathertop's back was turned, he exchanged for a scowl, at the same time shaking his fist and stamping his gouty foot—an incivility which brought its retribution along with it. The truth appears to have been that Mother Rigby's word of introduction, whatever it might be, had operated far more on the rich merchant's fears than on his good-will. Moreover, being a man of wonderfully acute observation, he had noticed that the painted figures on the bowl of Feathertop's pipe were in motion. Looking more closely, he became convinced that these figures were a party of little demons, each duly provided with horns and a tail, and dancing hand in hand, with gestures of diabolical merriment, round the circumference of the pipe bowl. As if to confirm his suspicions, while Master Gookin ushered his guest along a dusky passage from his private room to the parlour, the star on Feathertop's breast had scintillated actual flames, and threw a flickering gleam upon the wall, the ceiling and the floor.

With such sinister prognostics manifesting themselves on all hands, it is not to be marvelled at that the merchant should have felt that he was committing his daughter to a very questionable acquaintance. He cursed, in his secret soul, the insinuating elegance of Feathertop's manners, as this brilliant personage bowed, smiled, put his hand on his heart, inhaled a long whiff from his pipe, and enriched the atmosphere with the smoky vapour of a fragrant and visible sigh. Gladly would poor Master Gookin have thrust his dangerous guest into the street ; but there was a constraint and terror within him. This respectable old gentleman, we fear, at an earlier period of life, had given some pledge or other to the evil principle, and perhaps was now to redeem it by the sacrifice of his daughter.

It so happened that the parlour door was partly of glass, shaded by a silken curtain, the folds of which hung a little

awry. So strong was the merchant's interest in witnessing what was to ensue between the fair Polly and the gallant Feathertop that after quitting the room he could by no means refrain from peeping through the crevice of the curtain.

But there was nothing very miraculous to be seen; nothing—except the trifles previously noticed—to confirm the idea of a supernatural peril environing the pretty Polly. The stranger, it is true, was evidently a thorough and practised man of the world, systematic and self-possessed, and therefore the sort of a person to whom a parent ought not to confide a simple, young girl without due watchfulness for the result. The worthy magistrate, who had been conversant with all degrees and qualities of mankind, could not but perceive every motion and gesture of the distinguished Feathertop came in its proper place; nothing had been left rude or native in him; a well-digested conventionalism had incorporated itself thoroughly with his substance and transformed him into a work of art. Perhaps it was this peculiarity that invested him with a species of ghastliness and awe. It is the effect of anything completely and consummately artificial, in human shape, that the person impresses us as an unreality and as having hardly pith enough to cast a shadow upon the floor. As regarded Feathertop, all this resulted in a wild, extravagant, and fantastical impression, as if his life and being were akin to the smoke that curled upward from his pipe.

But pretty Polly Gookin felt not thus. The pair were now promenading the room; Feathertop with his dainty stride and no less dainty grimace; the girl with a native maidenly grace, just touched, not spoiled, by a slightly affected manner, which seemed caught from the perfect artifice of her companion. The longer the interview continued, the more charmed was pretty Polly, until, within the first quarter of an hour (as the old magistrate noted by

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his watch), she was evidently beginning to be in love. Nor need it have been witchcraft that subdued her in such a hurry; the poor child's heart, it may be, was so very fervent that it melted her with its own warmth as reflected from the hollow semblance of a lover. No matter what Feathertop said, his words found depth, and reverberation in her ear; no matter what he did, his action was heroic to her eye. And by this time it is to be supposed there was a blush on Polly's cheek, a tender smile about her mouth, and a liquid softness in her glance; while the star kept coruscating on Feathertop's breast, and the little demons careered with more frantic merriment than ever about the circumference of his pipe bowl. O pretty Polly Gookin, why should these imps rejoice so madly that a silly maiden's heart was about to be given to a shadow! Is it so unusual a misfortune, so rare a triumph?

By and by Feathertop paused, and, throwing himself into an imposing attitude, seemed to summon the fair girl to survey his figure and resist him longer if she could. His star, his embroidery, his buckles glowed at that instant with unutterable splendour; the picturesque hues of his attire took a richer depth of colouring; there was a gleam and polish over his whole presence betokening the perfect witchery of well-ordered manners. The maiden raised her eyes and suffered them to linger upon her companion with a bashful and admiring gaze. Then, as if desirous of judging what value her own simple comeliness might have side by side with so much brilliancy, she cast a glance towards the full-length looking-glass in front of which they happened to be standing. It was one of the truest plates in the world, and incapable of flattery. No sooner did the images therein reflected meet Polly's eye than she shrieked, shrank from the stranger's side, gazed at him for a moment in the wildest dismay, and sank insensible upon the floor. Feathertop

likewise had looked towards the mirror, and there beheld, not the glittering mockery of his outside show, but a picture of the sordid patchwork of his real composition, stripped of all witchcraft.

The wretched simulacrum ! We almost pity him. ' He threw up his arms with an expression of despair that went further than any of his previous manifestations towards vindicating his claims to be reckoned human ; for, perchance the only time since this so often empty and deceptive life of mortals began its course, an illusion had seen and fully recognized itself.

Mother Rigby was seated by her kitchen hearth in the twilight of this eventful day, and had just shaken the ashes out of a new pipe, when she heard a hurried tramp along the road. Yet it did not seem so much the tramp of human footsteps as the clatter of sticks or the rattling of dry bones.

' Ha ! ' thought the old witch, ' what step is that ? Whose skeleton is out of its grave now, I wonder ? '

A figure burst headlong into the cottage door. It was Feathertop ! His pipe was still alight ; the star still flamed upon his breast, nor had he lost, in any degree or manner that could be estimated, the aspect that assimilated him with our mortal brotherhood. But yet, in some indescribable way (as is the case with all that has deluded us when once found out), the poor reality was felt beneath the cunning artifice.

' What has gone wrong ? ' demanded the witch. ' Did yonder sniffing hypocrite thrust my darling from his door ? The villain ! I'll set twenty fiends to torment him till he offer thee his daughter on his bended knees ! '

' No, mother, ' said Feathertop despondingly ; ' it was not that. '

' Did the girl scorn my precious one ? ' asked Mother Rigby, her fierce eyes glowing, like two coals of Tophet.

'I'll cover her face with pimples! Her nose shall be as red as the coal in thy pipe! Her front teeth shall drop out! In a week hence she shall not be worth thy having!'

'Leave her alone, mother,' answered poor Feathertop; 'the girl was half won; and methinks a kiss from her sweet lips might have made me altogether human. But,' he added, after a brief pause and then a howl of self-contempt, 'I've seen myself for the wretched, ragged, empty thing I am! I'll exist no longer!'

Snatching the pipe from his mouth, he flung it with all his might against the chimney, and at the same instant sank upon the floor, a medley of straw and tattered garments, with some sticks protruding from the heap, and a shrivelled pumpkin in the midst. The eyeholes were now lustreless; but the rudely carved gap, that just before had been a mouth, still seemed to twist itself into a despairing grin, and was so far human.

'Poor fellow!' quoth Mother Rigby, with a rueful glance at the relics of her ill-fated contrivance. 'My poor, dear, pretty Feathertop! There are thousands upon thousands of coxcombs and charlatans in the world, made up of just such a jumble of worn-out, forgotten, and good-for-nothing trash as he was! Yet they live in fair repute, and never see themselves for what they are. And why should my poor puppet be the only one to know himself and perish for it?'

While thus muttering, the witch had filled a fresh pipe of tobacco, and held the stem between her fingers, as doubtful whether to thrust it into her own mouth or Feathertop's.

'Poor Feathertop!' she continued. 'I could easily give him another chance and send him forth again to-morrow. But no; his feelings are too tender, his sensibilities too deep. He seems to have too much heart to bustle for his own advantage in such an empty and heartless world. Well! well! I'll make a scarecrow of him after all. 'Tis an innocent

and a useful vocation, and will suit my darling well ; and, if each of his human brethren had as fit a one, 'twould be the better for mankind ; and as for ²this pipe of tobacco, I need it more than he.'

So saying, Mother Rigby put the stem between her lips 'Dickon !' cried she, in her high, sharp tone, 'another coal for my pipe !'

NOTES.

¹ '*A coal for my pipe*' : Witches were always pictured as very old evil women who spent much time sitting over fires and smoking pipes.

² *Broomstick* : It was believed of witches that they could fly through the air at night sitting on the sticks of brushes.

³ *Pumpkin head* : A head as intelligent as a pumpkin.

⁴ *Black Man* : The Devil.

⁵ *Louisbourg* : The French and British fought bitter battles over the colonization of America.

⁶ *boot* : Good, advantage (whence 'better')

⁷ *El Dorado* : A fictitious city or country, full of gold : the words are Spanish. The Spanish were great seekers of gold and silver and jewels in the sixteenth century and colonised both Central and South America, wealth from which lands long bolstered up the Spanish power in Europe, and casually developed (through practice in piracy) the seamanship of English sailors.

⁸ *bubble* : An impractical and visionary business venture, with no chance of commercial success.

⁹ *Castle in the air, chateau in Spain* : Daydreams.

¹⁰ *Cadiz* : A seaport of Spain.

¹¹ *Birmingham manufacture* : Birmingham, the second largest town in England, has many metal trades, particularly in tin and brass and other substitutes for gold and silver and expensive metals. Hence a substitute farthing, not a genuine copper one.

¹² *Meerschaum* : A soft, white mineral used to make the bowls of high quality pipes.

¹³ *Old country* : England.

¹⁴ *Grand Monarque* : Louis XIV of France. He reigned for the tremendous period of 72 years (1643—1715) and had a court of unequalled magnificence in Europe, and a sullen, discontented people whose descendants were eager for the revolution of 1789.

¹⁵ *Cession of Canada* : Actually occurred in 1763.

THE KILL

PETER FLEMING

Peter Fleming is a most versatile young man, who in his short life has already been on a voyage up the Amazon to hunt for a missing explorer, and employed by the famous newspaper *The Times* to investigate the situation in the Communist provinces of S. E. China. He has written attractively, wittily and sensibly of his adventures although he yet has to burst into fiction: this, however, is an example of his powers.

IN the cold waiting-room of a small railway station in the West of England two men were sitting. They had sat there for an hour and were likely to sit there longer. There was a thick fog outside. Their train was indefinitely delayed.

The waiting-room was a barren and unfriendly place. A naked electric bulb lit it with wan, disdainful efficiency. A notice, "No Smoking," stood on the mantelpiece; when you turned it round, it said "No Smoking" on the other side, too. Printed regulations relating to an outbreak of swine-fever in 1924 were pinned neatly to one wall, almost, but maddeningly not quite, in the centre of it. The stove gave out a hot, thick smell, powerful already, but increasing. A pale leprous flush on the black and beaded window showed that a light was burning on the platform outside, in the fog. Somewhere, water dripped with infinite reluctance on to corrugated iron.

The two men sat facing each other over the stove on chairs of an unswerving woodenness. Their acquaintance was no older than their vigil. From such talk as they had had, it seemed likely that they were to remain strangers.

The younger of the two resented the lack of contact in their relationship more than the lack of comfort in their

surroundings. His attitude toward his fellow beings had but recently undergone a transition from the subjective to the objective. As with many of his class and age, the routine, unrecognised as such, of an expensive education, with the triennial alternative¹ of those delights normal to wealth and gentility, had atrophied many of his curiosities. For the first twenty odd years of his life he had read humanity in terms of relevance rather than reality, looking on people who held no ordained place in his own existence much as a buck in a park watches visitors walking up the drive: mildly, rather resentfully inquiring—not inquisitive. Now, hot in reaction from this unconscious provincialism,² he treated mankind as a museum, gaping conscientiously at each fresh exhibit, hunting for the non-cumulative evidence of man's complexity with indiscriminate zeal. To each magic circle of individuality he saw himself as a kind of free-lance tangent. He aspired to be a connoisseur of men.

There was undoubtedly something arresting about the specimen before him. Of less than medium height, the stranger had yet that sort of ranging leanness that lends vicarious inches. He wore a long black overcoat, very shabby, and his shoes were covered with mud. His face had no colour in it, though the impression it produced was not one of pallor; the skin was of a dark sallow, tinged with grey. The nose was pointed, the jaw sharp and narrow. Deep vertical wrinkles, running down toward it from the high cheekbones, sketched the permanent groundwork of a broader smile than the deep-set, honey-coloured eyes seemed likely to authorise. The most striking thing about the face was the incongruity of its frame. On the back of his head the stranger wore a bowler hat with a very narrow brim. No word of such casual implications as a tilt did justice to its angle. It was clamped, by something at least as

holy as custom, to the back of his skull, and that thin, questing face confronted the world fiercely from under a black halo of nonchalance.

The man's whole appearance suggested *difference* rather than aloofness. The unnatural way he wore his hat had the significance of indirect comment, like the antics of a performing animal. It was as if he was part of some older thing, of which homo sapiens in a bowler hat was an expurgated edition. He sat with his shoulders bunched and his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets. The hint of discomfort in his attitude seemed due not so much to the fact that his chair was hard as to the fact that it was a chair.

The young man had found him uncommunicative. The most mobile sympathy, launching consecutive attacks on different fronts, had failed to draw him out. The reserved adequacy of his replies conveyed a rebuff more effectively than sheer surliness. Except to answer him, he did not look at the young man. When he did, his eyes were full of an abstracted amusement. Sometimes he smiled, but for no immediate cause.

Looking back down their hour together, the young man saw a field of endeavour on which frustrated banalities lay thick, like the discards of a routed army. But resolution, curiosity, and the need to kill time all clamoured against an admission of defeat.

"If he will not talk," thought the young man, "then I will. The sound of my own voice is infinitely preferable to the sound of none. I will tell him what has just happened to me. It is really a most extraordinary story. I will tell it as well as I can, and I shall be very much surprised if its impact on his mind does not shock this man into some form of self-revelation. He is unaccountable without being *outré*, and I am inordinately curious about him."

Aloud he said, in a brisk and engaging manner: "I think you said you were a hunting man!"

The other raised his quick, honey-coloured eyes. They gleamed with inaccessible amusement. Without answering he lowered them again to contemplate the little beads of light thrown through the ironwork of the stove on to the skirts of his overcoat. Then he spoke. He had a husky voice.

"I came here to hunt," he agreed.

"In that case," said the young man, "you will have heard of Lord Fleer's private pack. Their kennels are not far from here."

"I know them," replied the other.

"I have just been staying there," the young man continued. "Lord Fleer is my uncle."

The other looked up, smiled and nodded, with the bland inconsequence of a foreigner who does not understand what is being said to him. The young man swallowed his impatience.

"Would you," he continued, using a slightly more peremptory tone than heretofore—"would you care to hear a new and rather remarkable story about my uncle? Its dénouement is not two days old. It is quite short."

From the fastness of some hidden joke, those light eyes mocked the necessity of a definite answer. At length "Yes," said the stranger, "I would." The impersonality in his voice might have passed for a parade of sophistication, a reluctance to betray interest. But the eyes hinted that interest was alive elsewhere.

"Very well," said the young man.

Drawing his chair a little closer to the stove, he began:

"As perhaps you know, my uncle, Lord Fleer, leads a retired, though by no means an inactive life. For the last two or three hundred years, the currents of contemporary thought have passed mainly through the hands of men

whose gregarious instincts have been constantly awakened and almost invariably indulged. By the standards of the eighteenth century, when Englishmen first became self-conscious about solitude, my uncle would have been considered unsociable. In the early nineteenth century, those not personally acquainted with him would have thought him romantic. To-day, his attitude toward the sound and fury of modern life is too negative to excite comment as an oddity; yet even now, were he to be involved in an occurrence which could be called disastrous or interpreted as discreditable, the press would pillory him as a "Titled Recluse."

The truth of the matter is, my uncle has discovered the elixir, or, if you prefer it, the opiate, of self-sufficiency. A man of extremely simple tastes, not cursed with overmuch imagination, he sees no reason to cross frontiers of habit which the years have hallowed into rigidity. He lives in his castle (it may be described as commodious rather than comfortable), runs his estate at a slight profit, shoots a little, rides a great deal, and hunts as often as he can. He never sees his neighbours except by accident, thereby leading them to suppose, with sublime but unconscious arrogance, that he must be slightly mad. If he is, he can at least claim to have padded his own cell.³

My uncle has never married. As the only son of his only brother, I was brought up in the expectation of being his heir. During the war,⁴ however, an unforeseen development occurred.

In this national crisis my uncle, who was of course too old for active service, showed a lack of public spirit which earned him locally a good deal of unpopularity. Briefly, he declined to recognise the war, or, if he did recognise it, gave no sign of having done so. He continued to lead his own vigorous but (in the circumstances), rather irrelevant

life. Though he found himself at last obliged to recruit his hunt-servants from men of advanced age and uncertain mettle in any crisis of the chase, he contrived to mount them well, and twice a week during the season himself rode two horses to a standstill after the hill-foxes which, as no doubt you know, provide the best sport the Fleeer country has to offer.

When the local gentry came and made representations to him, saying that it was time he did something for his country besides destroying its vermin by the most unreliable and expensive method ever devised, my uncle was very sensible. He now saw, he said, that he had been standing too aloof from a struggle of whose progress (since he never read the papers) he had been only indirectly aware. The next day he wrote to London and ordered *The Times* and a Belgian refugee. It was the least he could do, he said. I think he was right.

The Belgian refugee turned out to be a female, and dumb. Whether one or both of these characteristics had been stipulated for by my uncle, nobody knew. At any rate, she took up her quarters at Fleeer: a heavy, unattractive girl of 25, with a shiny face and small black hairs on the backs of her hands. Her life appeared to be modelled on that of the larger ruminants, except, of course, that the greater part of it took place indoors. She ate a great deal, slept with a will, and had a bath every Sunday, remitting this salubrious custom only when the house-keeper, who enforced it, was away on her holiday. Much of her time she spent sitting on a sofa, on the landing outside her bedroom, with Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* open on her lap. She read either exceptionally slowly or not at all, for to my knowledge she carried the first volume about with her for eleven years. Hers, I think, was the contemplative type of mind.

The curious, and from my point of view the unfortunate aspect of my uncle's patriotic gesture was the gradually increasing affection with which he came to regard this unlovable creature. Although, or more probably because, he saw her only at meals, when her features were rather more animated than at other times, his attitude toward her passed from the detached to the courteous, and from the courteous to the paternal. At the end of the war there was no question of her return to Belgium, and one day in 1919 I heard with pardonable mortification that my uncle had legally adopted her, and was altering his will in her favour.

Time, however, reconciled me to being disinherited by a being who, between meals, could scarcely be described as sentient. I continued to pay an annual visit to Fleer, and to ride with my uncle after his big-boned Welsh hounds over the sullen, dark-grey hill country in which—since its possession was no longer assured to me—I now began to see a powerful, though elusive, beauty.

I came down here three days ago, intending to stay for a week. I found my uncle, who is a tall, fine-looking man with a beard, in his usual unassailable good health. The Belgian, as always, gave me the impression of being impervious to disease, to emotion, or indeed to anything short of an act of God. She had been putting on weight since she came to live with my uncle, and was now a very considerable figure of a woman, though not, as yet, unwieldy.

It was at dinner, on the evening of my arrival, that I first noticed a certain *malaise* behind my uncle's brusque, laconic manner. There was evidently something on his mind. After dinner he asked me to come into his study. I detected, in the delivery of the invitation, the first hint of embarrassment I had known him to betray.

The walls of the study were hung with maps and the

extremities of foxes. The room was littered with bills, catalogues, old gloves, fossils, rat-traps, cartridges, and feathers which had been used to clean his pipe—a stale diversity of jetsam which somehow managed to produce an impression of relevance and continuity, like the débris in an animal's lair. I had never been in the study before.

"Paul," said my uncle as soon as I had shut the door, "I am very much disturbed."

I assumed an air of sympathetic inquiry.

"Yesterday," my uncle went on, "one of my tenants came to see me. He is a decent man, who farms a strip of land outside the park wall, to the northward. He said that he had lost two sheep in a manner for which he was wholly unable to account. He said he thought they had been killed by some wild animal."

My uncle paused. The gravity of his manner was really portentous.

"Dogs?" I suggested, with the slightly patronising diffidence of one who has probability on his side.

My uncle shook his head judiciously. "This man had often seen sheep which had been killed by dogs. He said that they were always badly torn—nipped about the legs, driven into a corner, worried to death: it was never a clean piece of work. These two sheep had not been killed like that. I went down to see them for myself. Their throats had been torn out. They were not bitten, or nuzzled. They had both died in the open, not in a corner. Whatever did it was an animal more powerful and more cunning than a dog."

I said: "It couldn't have been something that had escaped from a travelling menagerie, I suppose?"

"They don't come into this part of the country," replied my uncle; "there are no fairs."

We were both silent for a moment. It was hard not to

show more curiosity than sympathy as I waited on some further revelation to stake out my uncle's claim on the latter emotion. I could put no interpretation on those two dead sheep wild enough to account for his evident distress.

He spoke again, but with obvious reluctance.

"Another was killed early this morning," he said in a low voice, "on the Home Farm. In the same way."

For lack of any better comment, I suggested beating the near-by coverts. There might be some.....

"We've scoured the woods," interrupted my uncle brusquely.

"And found nothing?"

"Nothing.....Except some tracks."

"What sort of tracks?"

My uncle's eyes were suddenly evasive. He turned his head away.

"They were a man's tracks," he said slowly. A log fell over in the fireplace.

Again a silence. The interview appeared to be causing him pain rather than relief. I decided that the situation could lose nothing through the frank expression of my curiosity. Plucking up courage, I asked him roundly what cause he had to be upset? Three sheep, the property of his tenants, had died deaths which, though certainly unusual, were unlikely to remain for long mysterious. Their destroyer, whatever it was, would inevitably be caught, killed, or driven away in the course of the next few days. The loss of another sheep or two was the worst he had to fear.

When I had finished, my uncle gave me an anxious, almost a guilty look. I was suddenly aware that he had a confession to make.

"Sit down," he said, "I wish to tell you something."

This is what he told me:

A quarter of a century ago, my uncle had had occasion to engage a new housekeeper. With the blend of fatalism and sloth which is the foundation of the bachelor's attitude to the servant problem, he took on the first applicant. She was a tall, black, slant-eyed woman from the Welsh border aged about 30. My uncle said nothing about her character, but described her as having "powers."⁵ When she had been at Flee some months, my uncle began to notice her, instead of taking her for granted. She was not averse to being noticed.

One day she came and told my uncle that she was with child by him. He took it calmly enough till he found that she expected him to marry her; or pretended to expect it. Then he flew into a rage, called her a whore, and told her she must leave the house as soon as the child was born. Instead of breaking down, or continuing the scene, she began to croon to herself in Welsh, looking at him sideways with a certain amusement. This frightened him. He forbade her to come near him again, had her things moved into an unused wing of the castle, and engaged another housekeeper.

A child was born, and they came and told my uncle that the woman was going to die; she asked for him continually, they said. As much frightened as distressed, he went through passages long unfamiliar to her room. When the woman saw him, she began to gabble in a preoccupied kind of way, looking at him all the time, as if she were repeating a lesson. Then she stopped, and asked that he should be shown the child.

It was a boy. The midwife, my uncle noticed, handled it with a reluctance almost amounting to disgust.

"That is your heir," said the dying woman, in a harsh, unstable voice. "I have told him what he is to do. He

will be a good son to me, and jealous of his birthright." And she went off, my uncle said, into a wild yet cogent rigmarole about a curse, embodied in the child, which would fall on any whom he made his heir over the bastard's head. At last her voice trailed away and she fell back, exhausted and staring.

As my uncle turned to go, the midwife whispered to him to look at the child's hands. Gently unclasping the podgy, futile little fists, she showed him that on each hand the third finger was longer than the second. . . .

Here I interrupted. The story had a certain queer force behind it, perhaps from its obvious effect on the teller. My uncle feared and hated the things he was saying.

"What did that mean?" I asked; "—the third finger longer than the second?"

"It took me a long time to discover," replied my uncle. "My own servants, when they saw I did not know, would not tell me. But at last I found out through the doctor, who had it from an old woman in the village. People born with their third finger longer than their second become werwolves. At least" (he made a perfunctory effort at amused indulgence) "that is what the common people here think."

"And what does that—what is that supposed to mean?" I, too, found myself throwing rather hasty sops to scepticism. I was growing strangely credulous.

"A werwolf," said my uncle, dabbling in improbability without self-consciousness, "is a human being who becomes, at intervals, to all intents and purposes a wolf. The transformation—or the supposed transformation—takes place at night. The werwolf kills men and animals and is supposed to drink their blood. Its preference is for men. All through the Middle Ages, down to the seventeenth century, there were innumerable cases (especially in France) of men

and women being legally tried for offences which they had committed as animals. Like the witches, they were rarely acquitted, but, unlike the witches, they seemed seldom to have been unjustly condemned." My uncle paused. "I have been reading the old books," he explained. "I wrote to a man in London who is interested in these things when I heard what was believed about the child."

"What became of the child?" I asked.

"The wife of one of my keepers took it in," said my uncle. "She was a stolid woman from the North who, I think, welcomed the opportunity to show what little store she set by the local superstitions. The boy lived with them till he was ten. Then he ran away. I had not heard of him since then till"—my uncle glanced at me almost apologetically—"till yesterday."

We sat for a moment in silence, looking at the fire. My imagination had betrayed my reason in its full surrender to the story. I had not got it in me to dispel his fears with a parade of sanity. I was a little frightened myself.

"You think it is your son, the werwolf, who is killing the sheep?" I said at length.

"Yes. For a boast: or for a warning: or perhaps out of spite, at a night's hunting wasted."

"Wasted?"

My uncle looked at me with troubled eyes.

"His business is not with sheep," he said uneasily.

For the first time I realised the implications of the Welshwoman's curse. The hunt was up. The quarry was the heir to Fleeer. I was glad to have been disinherited.

"I have told Germaine not to go out after dusk," said my uncle, coming in pat on my train of thought.

The Belgian was called Germaine; her other name was Vom.

* * * * *

I confess I spent no very tranquil night. My uncle's story had not wholly worked in me that "suspension of disbelief" which some one speaks of as being the prime requisite of good drama. But I have a powerful imagination. Neither fatigue nor common sense could quite banish the vision of that metamorphosed malignancy ranging with design, the black and silver silences outside my window. I found myself listening for the sound of loping footfalls on a frost-baked crust of beech-leaves. . . .

Whether it was in my dream that I heard, once, the sound of howling I do not know. But the next morning I saw, as I dressed, a man walking quickly up the drive. He looked like a shepherd. There was a dog at his heels trotting with a noticeable lack of assurance. At breakfast my uncle told me that another sheep had been killed, almost under the noses of the watchers. His voice shook a little. Solicitude sat oddly on his features as he looked at Germaine. She was eating porridge, as if for a wager.

After breakfast we decided on a campaign. I will not weary you with the details of its launching and its failure. All day we quartered the woods with thirty men, mounted and on foot. Near the scene of the kill our dogs picked up a scent which they followed for two miles and more, only to lose it on the railway line. But the ground was too hard for tracks, and the men said it could only have been a fox or a polecat, so surely and readily did the dogs follow it.

The exercise and the occupation were good for our nerves. But late in the afternoon my uncle grew anxious; twilight was closing in swiftly under a sky heavy with clouds, and we were some distance from Fleeer. He gave final instructions for the penning of the sheep by night, and we turned our horses' heads for home.

We approached the castle by the back drive, which was little used: a dank, unholy alley, running the gauntlet

of a belt of firs and laurels. Beneath our horses' hoofs flints chinked—remotely under a thick carpet of moss. Each consecutive cloud from their nostrils hung with an air of permanency, as if bequeathed to the unmoving air.

We were perhaps three hundred yards from the tall gate leading to the stable yard when both horses stopped dead, simultaneously. Their heads were turned toward the trees on our right, beyond which, I knew, the sweep of the main drive converged on ours.

My uncle gave a short, inarticulate cry in which premonition stood aghast at the foreseen. At the same moment, something howled on the other side of the trees. There was a relish, and a kind of sobbing laughter, in that hateful sound. It rose and fell luxuriously, and rose and fell again, fouling the night. Then it died away, fawning on satiety in a throaty whimper.

The forces of silence fell unavailingly on its rear; its filthy echoes still went reeling through our heads. We were aware that feet went loping lightly down the iron-hard drive. . . . two feet.

My uncle flung himself off his horse and dashed through the trees. I followed. We scrambled down a bank and out into the open. The only figure in sight was motionless.

Germaine Vom lay doubled up in the drive, a solid black mark against the shifting values of the dusk. We ran forward. . . .

To me she had always been an improbable cipher rather than a real person. I could not help reflecting that she died, as she had lived, in the live-stock tradition. Her throat had been torn out.

* * * *

The young man leant back in his chair, a little dizzy from talking and from the heat of the stove. The inconvenient realities of the waiting-room, forgotten in his

narrative, closed in on him again. He sighed, and smiled rather apologetically at the stranger.

• “It is a wild and improbable story,” he said, “I do not expect you to believe the whole of it. For me, perhaps, the reality of its implications has obscured its almost ludicrous lack of verisimilitude. You see, by the death of the Belgian I am heir to Fleeer.”

The stranger smiled : a slow, but no longer an abstracted smile. His honey-coloured eyes were bright. Under his long black overcoat his body seemed to be stretching itself in sensual anticipation. He rose silently to his feet.

The other found a sharp cold fear drilling into his vitals. Something behind those shining eyes threatened him with appalling immediacy like a sword at his heart. He was sweating. He dared not move.

The stranger's smile was now a grin, a ravening convulsion of the face. His eyes blazed with a hard and purposeful delight. A thread of saliva dangled from the corner of his mouth.

Very slowly he lifted one hand and removed his bowler hat. Of the fingers crooked about its brim the young man saw that the third was longer than the second.

NOTES

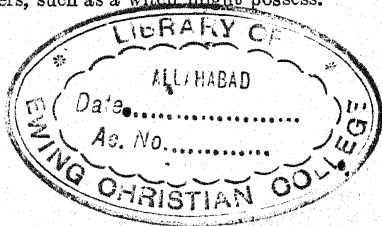
¹ *Triennial alternative* : Holidays three times a year.

² *Provincialism* : Compared to the inhabitants of London people in the provinces, the county districts or towns, have been in the past at any rate, very slow to accept anything outside of their previous experience or to stop regarding it as curious—an attitude called provincialism.

³ *Padded his own cell* : Some lunatics try to inflict injuries on themselves, and so are locked in cells with soft, padded walls.

⁴ *The War* : 1914-18.

⁵ *Powers* : Supernatural powers, such as a witch might possess.



THE LIFTED VEIL

GEORGE ELIOT

1819—1880

Despite the name the author of this story was a woman. In the last century several women adopted men's names to combat a strong prejudice in the reading public that a woman could never write anything so good as a man, and was not worth reading. There is a very similar prejudice to-day against women doctors and lawyers. Her name was Marian Evans and she was born in 1819. She wrote mostly novels. Her work was never that of a first-class novelist, but is a good picture of the religiously strict, imaginatively and intellectually narrow society in which she was bred, and which must be visualised if that period of England's history is to be grasped. This story, however, deals with the rare psychic phenomenon of an occasional consciousness of future events, of moments when the veil of the future is lifted. She died in 1880.

THE time of my end approaches. I have lately been subject to attacks of *angina pectoris*¹; and in the ordinary course of things, my physician tells me, I may fairly hope that my life will not be protracted many months. Unless, then, I am cursed with an exceptional physical constitution, as I am cursed with an exceptional mental character, I shall not much longer groan under the wearisome burthen of this earthly existence. If it were to be otherwise—if I were to live on to the age most men desire and provide for—I should for once have known whether the miseries of delusive expectation can outweigh the miseries of true prevision. For I foresee when I shall die, and everything that will happen in my last moments.

Just a month from this day, on September 20, 1850, I shall be sitting in this chair, in this study, at ten o'clock at night, longing to die, weary of incessant insight and foresight, without delusions and without hope. Just as I am watching a tongue of blue flame rising in the fire, and my lamp is burning low, the horrible contraction will begin at my chest.

I shall only have time to reach the bell, and pull it violently,² before the sense of suffocation will come. No one will answer my bell. I know why. My two servants are lovers, and will have quarrelled. My housekeeper will have rushed out of the house in a fury, two hours before, hoping that Perry will believe she has gone to drown herself. Perry is alarmed at last, and is gone out after her. The little scullery-maid is asleep on a bench: she never answers the bell; it does not wake her. The sense of suffocation increases: my lamp goes out with a horrible stench: I make a great effort, and snatch at the bell again. I long for life, and there is no help. I thirsted for the unknown³: the thirst is gone. O God, let me stay with the known, and be weary of it: I am content. Agony of pain and suffocation—and all the while the earth, the fields, the pebbly brook at the bottom of the rookery, the fresh scent after the rain, the light of the morning through my chamber-window, the warmth of the hearth after the frosty air—will darkness close over them for ever?

Darkness—darkness—no pain—nothing but darkness: but I am passing on and on through the darkness: my thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward . . .

Before that time comes, I wish to use my last hours of ease and strength in telling the strange story of my experience. I have never fully unbosomed myself to any human being; I have never been encouraged to trust much in the sympathy of my fellow-men. But we have all a chance of meeting with some pity, some tenderness, some charity, when we are dead: it is the living only who cannot be forgiven—the living only from whom men's indulgence and reverence are held off, like the rain by the hard east wind. While the heart beats, bruise it—it is your only opportunity; while the eye can still turn towards you with moist, timid entreaty,

freeze it with an icy unanswering gaze ; while the ear, that delicate messenger to the inmost sanctuary of the soul, can still take in the tones of kindness, "put it off with hard civility, or sneering compliment, or envious affectation of indifference ; while the creative brain can still throb with the sense of injustice, with the yearning for brotherly recognition—make haste—oppress it with your ill-considered judgments, your trivial comparisons, your careless misrepresentations. The heart will by and by be still—" *ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit*⁴ ; "the eye will cease to entreat ; the ear will be deaf ; the brain will have ceased from all wants as well as from all work. Then your charitable speeches may find vent ; then you may remember and pity the toil and the struggle and the failure ; then you may give due honour to the work achieved ; then you may find extenuation for errors, and may consent to bury them.

That is a trivial schoolboy text ; why do I dwell on it ? It has little reference to me, for I shall leave no works behind me for men to honour. I have no near relatives who will make up, by weeping over my grave, for the wounds they inflicted on me when I was among them. It is only the story of my life that will perhaps win a little more sympathy from strangers when I am dead, than I ever believed it would obtain from my friends while I was living.

My childhood perhaps seems happier to me than it really was, by contrast with all the after-years. For then the curtain of the future was as impenetrable to me as to other children : I had all their delight in the present hour, their sweet indefinite hopes for the morrow ; and I had a tender mother : even now, after the dreary lapse of long years, a slight trace of sensation accompanies the remembrance of her caress as she held me on her knee—her arms round my little body, her cheek pressed on mine. I had a complaint of

⁴Inscription on Swift's tombstone.⁵

the eyes that made me blind for a little while, and she kept me on her knee from morning till night. That unequalled love soon vanished out of my life, and even to my childish consciousness it was as if that life had become more chill. I rode my little white pony with the groom by my side as before, but there were no loving eyes looking at me as I mounted, no glad arms opened to me when I came back. Perhaps I missed my mother's love more than most children of seven or eight would have done, to whom the other pleasures of life remained as before; for I was certainly a very sensitive child. I remember still the mingled trepidation and delicious excitement with which I was affected by the tramping of the horses on the pavement in the echoing stables, by the loud resonance of the groom's voices, by the bark of the dogs as my father's carriage thundered under the archway of the courtyard, by the din of the gong as it gave notice of luncheon and dinner. The measured tramp of soldiery which I sometimes heard—for my father's house lay near a county town where there were large barracks—made me sob and tremble; and yet when they were gone past, I longed for them to come back again.

I fancy my father thought me an odd child, and had little fondness for me; though he was very careful in fulfilling what he regarded as a parent's duties. But he was already past the middle of life, and I was not his only son. My mother had been his second wife, and he was five-and-forty when he married her. He was a firm, unbending, intensely orderly man, in root and stem a banker, but with a flourishing graft of the active landholder, aspiring to county influence: one of those people who are always like themselves from day to day, who are uninfluenced by the weather, and neither know melancholy nor high spirits. I held him in great awe, and appeared more timid and sensitive in his presence than at other times; a circumstance which, perhaps,

helped to confirm him in the intention to educate me on a different plan from the prescriptive one with which he had complied in the case of my elder brother, already a tall youth at Eton.⁶ My brother was to be his representative and successor ; he must go to Eton and Oxford, for the sake of making connections, of course : my father was not a man to under-rate the bearing of Latin satirists or Greek dramatists on the attainment of an aristocratic position. But, intrinsically, he had slight esteem for "those dead but sceptred spirits" ; having qualified himself for forming an independent opinion by reading Potter's *Æschylus*, and dipping into Francis's *Horace*. To this negative view he added a positive one, derived from a recent connection with mining speculations ; namely, that a scientific education was the really useful training for a younger son. Moreover, it was clear that a shy, sensitive boy like me was not fit to encounter the rough experience of a public school. Mr. Letherall⁷ had said so very decidedly. Mr. Letherall was a large man in spectacles who one day took my small head between his large hands, and pressed it here and there in an exploratory, suspicious manner—then placed each of his great thumbs on my temples, and pushed me a little way from him, and stared at me with glittering spectacles. The contemplation appeared to displease him, for he frowned sternly, and said to my father, drawing his thumbs across my eyebrows :

"The deficiency is there, sir—there ; and here," he added, touching the upper sides of my head, "here is the excess. That must be brought out, sir, and this must be laid to sleep."

I was in a state of tremor, partly at the vague idea that I was the object of reprobation, partly in the agitation of my first hatred—hatred of this big, spectacled man, who pulled my head about as if he wanted to buy and cheapen it.

I am not aware how much Mr. Letherall had to do with the system afterwards adopted towards me, but it was presently clear that private tutors, natural history, science, and the modern languages, were the appliances by which the defects of my organization were to be remedied. I was very stupid about machines, so I was to be greatly occupied with them ; I had no memory for classification, so it was particularly necessary that I should study systematic zoology and botany ; I was hungry for human deeds and humane motions, so I was to be plentifully crammed with the mechanical powers, the elementary bodies, and the phenomena of electricity and magnetism. A better-constituted boy would certainly have profited under my intelligent tutors, with their scientific apparatus ; and would, doubtless, have found the phenomena of electricity and magnetism as fascinating as I was, every Thursday, assured they were. As it was, I could have paired off, for ignorance of whatever was taught me, with the worst Latin scholar that was ever turned out of a classical academy. I read Plutarch, and Shakespeare, and Don Quixote on the sly, and supplied myself in that way with wandering thoughts, while my tutor was assuring me that "an improved man, as distinguished from an ignorant one, was a man who knew the reason why water ran downhill." I had no desire to be this improved man ; I was glad of the running water ; I could watch it and listen to it gurgling among the pebbles, and bathing the bright green water-plants, by the hour together. I did not want to know *why* it ran ; I had perfect confidence that there were good reasons for what was so very beautiful.

There is no need to dwell on this part of my life. I have said enough to indicate that my nature was of the sensitive, unpractical order, and that it grew up in an uncongenial medium, which could never foster it into happy, healthy development. When I was sixteen I was sent to

Geneva⁸ to complete my course of education; and the change was a very happy one to me, for the first sight of the Alps, with the setting sun on them, as we descended the Jura, seemed to me like an entrance into heaven; and the three years of my life there were spent in a perpetual sense of exaltation, as if from a draught of delicious wine, at the presence of nature in all her awful loveliness. You will think, perhaps, that I must have been a poet, from this early sensibility to nature. But my lot was not so happy as that. A poet pours forth his song and *believes* in the listening ear and answering soul, to which his song will be floated sooner or later. But the poet's sensibility without his voice—the poet's sensibility that finds no vent but in silent tears on the sunny bank, when the noonday light sparkles on the water, or in an inward shudder at the sound of harsh human tones, the sight of a cold human eye—this dumb passion brings with it a fatal solitude of soul in the society of one's fellow-men. My least solitary moments were those in which I pushed off in my boat, at evening, towards the centre of the lake; it seemed to me that the sky, and the glowing mountain tops, and the wide blue water, surrounded me with a cherishing love such as no human face had shed on me since my mother's love had vanished out of my life. I used to do as Jean Jacques⁹ did—lie down in my boat and let it glide where it would, while I looked up at the departing glow leaving one mountain top after the other, as if the prophet's chariot of fire were passing over them on its way to the home of light. Then, when the white summits were all sad and corpse-like, I had to push homeward, for I was under careful surveillance, and was allowed no late wanderings. This disposition of mine was not favourable to the formation of intimate friendships among the numerous youths of my own age who are always to be found studying at Geneva. Yet I

made *one* such friendship ; and, singularly enough, it was with a youth whose intellectual tendencies were the very reverse of my own. I shall call him Charles Meunier ; his real surname—an English one, for he was of English extraction—having since become celebrated. He was an orphan, who lived on a miserable pittance while he pursued the medical studies for which he had a special genius. Strange ! that with my vague mind, susceptible and unobservant, hating inquiry and given up to contemplation, I should have been drawn towards a youth whose strongest passion was science. But the bond was not an intellectual one ; it came from a source that can happily blend the stupid with the brilliant, the dreamy with the practical, it came from community of feeling. Charles was poor and ugly, derided by Genevese *gamins*,¹⁰ and not acceptable in drawing-rooms. I saw that he was isolated, as I was, though from a different cause, and, stimulated by a sympathetic resentment, I made timid advances towards him. It is enough to say that there sprang up as much comradeship between us as our different habits would allow ; and in Charles's rare holidays we went up the Seve together, or took the boat to Vevay, while I listened dreamily to the monologues in which he unfolded his bold conceptions of future experiment and discovery. I mingled them confusedly in my thought with glimpses of blue water and delicate floating cloud, with the notes of birds and the distant glitter of the glacier. He knew quite well that my mind was half absent, yet he liked to talk to me in this way ; for don't we talk of our hopes and our projects even to dogs and birds, when they love us ? I have mentioned this one friendship because of its connection with a strange and terrible scene which I shall have to narrate in my subsequent life.

This happier life at Geneva was put an end to by a severe illness, which is partly a blank to me, partly a time

of dimly-remembered suffering, with the presence of my father by my bed from time to time. Then came the languid monotony of convalescence, the days gradually breaking into variety and distinctness as my strength enabled me to take longer and longer drives. On one of these more vividly remembered days, my father said to me, as he sat beside my sofa :

“ When you are quite well enough to travel, Latimer, I shall take you home with me. The journey will amuse you and do you good, for I shall go through the Tyrol and Austria, and you will see many new places. Our neighbours, the Filmores, are come ; Alfred will join us at Basle, and we shall all go together to Vienna, and back by Prague. ”¹¹

My father was called away before he had finished his sentence, and he left my mind resting on the word *Prague*, with a strange sense that a new and wondrous scene was breaking upon me : a city under the broad sunshine, that seemed to me as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course—unrefreshed for ages by dews of night, or the rushing rain-cloud ; scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale répétition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings in their regal gold-inwoven tatters. The city looked so thirsty that the broad river seemed to me a sheet of metal ; and the blackened statues, as I passed under their blank gaze, along the unending bridge, with their ancient garments and their saintly crowns, seemed to me the real inhabitants and owners of this place, while the busy, trivial men and women, hurrying to and fro, were a swarm of ephemeral visitants infesting it for a day. It is such grim, stony beings as these, I thought, who are the fathers of ancient faded children, in those tanned time-fretted dwellings that crowd the steep before me ; who

pay their court in the worn and crumbling pomp of the palace which stretches its monotonous length on the height ; who worship wearily in the stifling air of the churches, urged by no fear or hope, but compelled by their doom to be ever old and undying, to live on in the rigidity of habit, as they live on in perpetual midday, without the repose of night or the new birth of morning.

A stunning clang of metal suddenly thrilled through me, and I became conscious of the objects in my room again : one of the fire-irons had fallen as Pierre opened the door to bring me my draught.¹² My heart was palpitating violently, and I begged Pierre to leave my draught beside me ; I would take it presently.

As soon as I was alone again, I began to ask myself whether I had been sleeping. Was this a dream—this wonderfully distinct vision—minute in its distinctness down to a patch of rainbow light on the pavement, transmitted through a coloured lamp in the shape of a star—of a strange city, quite unfamiliar to my imagination ? I had seen no picture of Prague : it lay in my mind as a mere name, with vaguely-remembered historical associations—ill-defined memories of imperial grandeur and religious wars.

Nothing of this sort had ever occurred in my dreaming experience before, for I had often been humiliated because my dreams were only saved from being utterly disjointed and commonplace by the frequent terrors of nightmare. But I could not believe that I had been asleep, for I remembered distinctly the gradual breaking-in of the vision upon me, like the new images in a dissolving view, or the growing distinctness of the landscape as the sun lifts up the veil of the morning mist. And while I was conscious of this incipient vision, I was also conscious that Pierre came to tell my father Mr. Filmore was waiting for him, and that my father hurried out of the room. No, it was not a

dream; was it—the thought was full of tremulous exultation—was it the poet's nature in me, hitherto only a troubled yearning sensibility, now manifesting itself suddenly as spontaneous creation? Surely it was in this way that Hômer saw the plain of Troy, that Dante saw the abodes of the departed, that Milton saw the earthward flight of the Tempter. Was it that my illness had wrought some happy change in my organization—given a firmer tension to my nerves—carried off some dull obstruction? I had often read of such effects—in works of fiction at least. Nay; in genuine biographies I had read of the subtilising or exalting ence of some diseases on the mental powers. Did not Novalis¹³ feel his inspiration intensified under the progress of consumption?

When my mind had dwelt for some time on this blissful idea, it seemed to me that I might perhaps test it by an exertion of my will. The vision had begun when my father was speaking of our going to Prague. I did not for a moment believe it was really a representation of that city; I believed—I hoped it was a picture that my newly liberated genius had painted in fiery haste, with the colours snatched from lazy memory. Suppose I were to fix my mind on some other place—Venice, for example, which was far more familiar to my imagination than Prague: perhaps the same sort of result would follow. I concentrated my thoughts on Venice; I stimulated my imagination with poetic memories, and strove to feel myself present in Venice, as I had felt myself present in Prague. But in vain. I was only colouring the Canaletto¹⁴ engravings that hung in my old bedroom at home; the picture was a shifting one, my mind wandering uncertainly in search of more vivid images; I could see no accident of form or shadow without conscious labour after the necessary conditions. It was all prosaic effort, not rapt passivity, such as I had experienced

half an hour before. I was discouraged ; but I remembered that inspiration was fitful.

• For several days I was in a state of excited expectation, watching for a recurrence of my new gift. I sent my thoughts ranging over my world of knowledge, in the hope that they would find some object which would send a reawakening vibration through my slumbering genius. But no ; my world remained as dim as ever, and that flash of strange light refused to come again, though I watched for it with palpitating eagerness.

My father accompanied me every day in a drive, and a gradually lengthening walk as my powers of walking increased ; and one evening he had agreed to come and fetch me at twelve the next day, that we might go together to select a musical box,¹⁵ and other purchases rigorously demanded of a rich Englishman visiting Geneva. He was one of the most punctual of men and bankers, and I was always nervously anxious to be quite ready for him at the appointed time. But, to my surprise, at a quarter past twelve he had not appeared. I felt all the impatience of a convalescent who has nothing particular to do, and who has just taken a tonic in the prospect of immediate exercise that would carry off the stimulus.

Unable to sit still and reserve my strength, I walked up and down the room, looking out on the current of the Rhone, just where it leaves the dark-blue lake ; but thinking all the while of the possible causes that could detain my father.

Suddenly I was conscious that my father was in the room, but not alone : there were two persons with him. Strange ! I had heard no foot-step, I had not seen the door open ; but I saw my father, and at his right hand our neighbour Mrs. Filmore, whom I remembered very well, though I had not seen her for five years. She was a

commonplace middle-aged woman, in silk and cashmere;¹⁶ but the lady on the left of my father was not more than twenty, a tall, slim, willowy figure, with luxuriant blond hair, arranged in cunning braids and folds that looked almost too massive for the slight figure and the small-featured, thin-lipped face they crowned. But the face had not a girlish expression: the features were sharp, the pale grey eyes at once acute, restless, and sarcastic. They were fixed on me in half-smiling curiosity, and I felt a painful sensation as if a sharp wind were cutting me. The pale-green dress, and the green leaves that seemed to form a border about her pale blond hair, made me think of a Water-Nixie¹⁷—for my mind was full of German lyrics, and this pale, fatal-eyed woman, with the green weeds, looked like a birth from some cold sedgy stream, the daughter of an aged river.

"Well, Latimer, you thought me long," my father said. . . .

But while the last word was in my ears, the whole group vanished, and there was nothing between me and the Chinese painted folding-screen that stood before the door. I was cold and trembling; I could only totter forward and throw myself on the sofa. This strange new power had manifested itself again. . . . But *was* it a power? Might it not rather be a disease—a sort of intermittent delirium, concentrating my energy of brain into moments of unhealthy activity, and leaving my saner hours all the more barren? I felt a dizzy sense of unreality in what my eye rested on; I grasped the bell convulsively, like one trying to free himself from nightmare, and rang it twice. Pierre came with a look of alarm in his face.

"Monsieur ne se trouve pas bien ?¹⁸" he said anxiously.

"I'm tired of waiting, Pierre," I said, as distinctly and emphatically as I could, like a man determined to be sober in spite of wine; "I'm afraid something has happened to

my father—he's usually so punctual. Run to the Hôtel des Bergues and see if he is there."

Pierre left the room at once, with a soothing "Bien, monsieur; ¹⁹" and I felt the better for this scene of simple, waking prose. Seeking to calm myself still further, I went into my bedroom, adjoining the *salon*, ²⁰ and opened a case of eau-de-Cologne ²¹; took out a bottle; went through the process of taking out the cork very neatly, and then rubbed the reviving spirit over my hands and forehead, and under my nostrils, drawing a new delight from the scent because I had procured it by slow details of labour, and by no strange sudden madness. Already I had begun to taste something of the horror that belongs to the lot of a human being whose nature is not adjusted to simple human conditions.

Still enjoying the scent, I returned to the *salon*, but it was not unoccupied, as it had been before I left it. In front of the Chinese folding-screen there was my father, with Mrs. Filmore on his right hand, and on his left—the slim blond-haired girl, with the keen face and the keen eyes fixed on me in half-smiling curiosity.

"Well, Latimer, you thought me long," my father said. . . .

I heard no more, felt no more, till I became conscious that I was lying with my head low on the sofa, Pierre, and my father by my side. As soon as I was thoroughly revived, my father left the room, and presently returned, saying:

"I've been to tell the ladies how you are, Latimer. They were waiting in the next room. We shall put off our shopping expedition to-day."

Presently he said, "That young lady is Bertha Grant, Mrs. Filmore's orphan niece. Filmore has adopted her, and she lives with them, so you will have her for a neighbour when we go home—perhaps for a near relation; for

there is a tenderness between her and Alfred, I suspect, and I should be gratified by the match, since Filmore means to provide for her in every way as if she were his daughter. It had not occurred to me that you knew nothing about her living with the Filmores."

He made no further allusion to the fact of my having fainted at the moment of seeing her, and I would not for the world have told him the reason: I shrank from the idea of disclosing to anyone what might be regarded as a pitiable peculiarity, most of all from betraying it to my father, who would have suspected my sanity ever after.

I do not mean to dwell with particularity on the details of my experience. I have described these two cases at length, because they had definite, clearly traceable results in my after-lot.

Shortly after this last occurrence—I think the very next day—I began to be aware of a phase in my abnormal sensibility, to which, from the languid and slight nature of my intercourse with others since my illness, I had not been alive before. This was the obtrusion on my mind of the mental process going forward in first one person, and then another, with whom I happened to be in contact: the vagrant, frivolous ideas and emotions of some uninteresting acquaintance—Mrs. Filmore, for example—would force themselves on my consciousness like an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect. But this unpleasant sensibility was fitful, and left me moments of rest, when the souls of my companions were once more shut out from me, and I felt a relief such as silence brings to wearied nerves. I might have believed this importunate insight to be merely a diseased activity of the imagination, but that my prevision of incalculable words and actions proved it to have a fixed relation to the mental process in other minds. But this

superadded consciousness, wearying and annoying enough when it urged on me the trivial experience of indifferent people, became an intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening to me the souls of those who were in a close relation to me—when the rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent makeshift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap.

At Basle we were joined by my brother Alfred, now a handsome, self-confident man of six-and-twenty—a thorough contrast to my fragile, nervous, ineffectual self. I believe I was held to have a sort of half-womanish, half-ghostly beauty; for the portrait-painters, who are thick as weeds at Geneva, had often asked me to sit to them, and I had been the model of a dying minstrel in a fancy picture. But I thoroughly disliked my own physique and nothing but the belief that it was a condition of poetic genius would have reconciled me to it. That brief hope was quite fled, and I saw in my face now nothing but the stamp of a morbid organization, framed for passive suffering—too feeble for the sublime resistance of poetic production. Alfred, from whom I had been almost constantly separated, and who, in his present stage of character and appearance, came before me as a perfect stranger, was bent on being extremely friendly and brother-like to me. He had the superficial kindness of a good-humoured, self-satisfied nature, that fears no rivalry, and has encountered no contrarieties. I am not sure that my disposition was good enough for me to have been quite free from envy towards him, even if our desires

had not clashed, and if I had been in the healthy human condition which admits of generous confidence and charitable construction. There must always have been an antipathy between our natures. As it was, he became in a few weeks an object of intense hatred to me ; and when he entered the room, still more when he spoke, it was as if a sensation of grating metal had set my teeth on edge. My diseased consciousness was more intensely and continually occupied with his thoughts and emotions, than with those of any other person who came in my way. I was perpetually exasperated with the petty promptings of his conceit and his love of patronage, with his self-complacent belief in Bertha Grant's passion for him, with his half-pitying contempt for me—seen not in the ordinary indications of intonation and phrase and slight action, which an acute and suspicious mind is on the watch for, but in all their naked skinless complication.

For we were rivals, and our desires clashed, though he was not aware of it. I have said nothing yet of the effect Bertha Grant produced in me on a nearer acquaintance. That effect was chiefly determined by the fact that she made the only exception, among all the human beings about me, to my unhappy gift of insight. About Bertha I was always in a state of uncertainty : I could watch the expression of her face, and speculate on its meaning ; I could ask for her opinion with the real interest of ignorance ; I could listen for her words and watch for her smile with hope and fear : she had for me the fascination of an unravelled destiny. I say it was this fact that chiefly determined the strong effect she produced on me : for, in the abstract, no womanly character could seem to have less affinity for that of a shrinking, romantic, passionate youth than Bertha's. She was keen, sarcastic, unimaginative, prematurely cynical, remaining critical and unmoved in

the most impressive scenes, inclined to dissect all my favourite poems, and especially contemptuous towards the German lyrics which were my pet literature at that time. To this moment I am unable to define my feeling towards her: it was not ordinary boyish admiration, for she was the very opposite, even to the colour of her hair, of the ideal woman who still remained to me the type of loveliness; and she was without that enthusiasm for the great and good, which, even at the moment of her strongest dominion over me, I should have declared to be the highest element of character. But there is no tyranny more complete than that which a self-centred negative nature exercises over a morbidly sensitive nature perpetually craving sympathy and support. The most independent people feel the effect of a man's silence in heightening their value for his opinion—feel an additional triumph in conquering the reverence of a critic habitually captious and satirical: no wonder, then that an enthusiastic self-distrusting youth should watch and wait before the closed secret of a sarcastic woman's face, as if it were the shrine of the doubtfully benignant deity who ruled his destiny. For a young enthusiast is unable to imagine the total negation in another mind of the emotions which are stirring his own: they may be feeble, latent, inactive, he thinks, but they are there—they may be called forth; sometimes, in moments of happy hallucination, he believes they may be there in all the greater strength because he sees no outward sign of them. And this effect, as I have intimated, was heightened to its utmost intensity in me, because Bertha was the only being who remained for me in the mysterious seclusion of soul that renders such youthful delusion possible. Doubtless there was another sort of fascination at work—that subtle physical attraction which delights in cheating our psychological predictions, and in compelling the men who paint sylphs,

to fall in love with some *bonne et brave femme*,²² heavy-heeled and freckled.

Bertha's behaviour towards me was such as to encourage all my illusions, to heighten my boyish passion, and make me more and more dependent on her smiles. Looking back with my present wretched knowledge I conclude that her vanity and love of power were intensely gratified by the belief that I had fainted on first seeing her purely from the strong impression her person had produced on me. The most prosaic woman likes to believe herself the object of a violent, a poetic passion; and without a grain of romance in her, Bertha had that spirit of intrigue which gave piquancy to the idea that the brother of the man she meant to marry was dying with love and jealousy for her sake. That she meant to marry my brother, was what at that time I did not believe; for though he was assiduous in his attentions to her, and I knew well enough that both he and my father had made up their minds to this result, there was not yet an understood engagement—there had been no explicit declaration; and Bertha habitually, while she flirted with my brother, and accepted his homage in a way that implied to him a thorough recognition of its intention, made me believe, by the subtlest looks and phrases—feminine nothings which could never be quoted against her—that he was really the object of her secret ridicule; that she thought him, as I did, a coxcomb, whom she would have pleasure in disappointing. Me she openly petted in my brother's presence, as if I were too young and sickly ever to be thought of as a lover; and that was the view he took of me. But I believe she must inwardly have delighted in the tremors into which she threw me by the coaxing way in which she patted my curls, while she laughed at my quotations. Such caresses were always given in the presence of our friends; for when we were alone together, she affected

a much greater distance towards me, and now and then took the opportunity, by words or slight actions, to stimulate my foolish timid hope that she really preferred me. And why should she not follow her inclination? I was not in so advantageous a position as my brother, but I had fortune, I was not a year younger than she was, and she was an heiress, who would soon be of age to decide for herself.

The fluctuations of hope and fear, confined to this one channel, made each day in her presence a delicious torment. There was one deliberate act of hers which especially helped to intoxicate me. When we were at Vienna her twentieth birthday occurred, and as she was very fond of ornaments, we all took the opportunity of the splendid jewellers' shops in that Teutonic Paris to purchase her a birthday present of jewellery. Mine, naturally, was the least expensive; it was an opal ring—the opal was my favourite stone, because it seems to blush and turn pale as if it had a soul. I told Bertha so when I gave it her, and said that it was an emblem of the poetic nature, changing with the changing light of heaven and of woman's eyes. In the evening she appeared elegantly dressed, and wearing conspicuously all the birthday presents except mine. I looked eagerly at her fingers, but saw no opal. I had no opportunity of noticing this to her during the evening; but the next day, when I found her seated near the window alone, after breakfast, I said, "You scorn to wear my poor opal. I should have remembered that you despised poetic nature, and should have given you coral, or turquoise, or some other opaque unresponsive stone." "Do I despise it?" she answered, taking hold of a delicate gold chain which she always wore round her neck and drawing out the end from her bosom with my ring hanging to it; "It hurts me a little, I can tell you," she said, with her usual dubious smile, "to wear it in that secret place; and since your poetical nature is so

stupid as to prefer a more public position, I shall not endure the pain any longer."

She took off the ring from the chain and put it on her finger, smiling still, while the blood rushed to my cheeks, and I could not trust myself to say a word of entreaty that she would keep the ring where it was before.

I was completely fooled by this, and for two days shut myself up in my own room whenever Bertha was absent, that I might intoxicate myself afresh with the thought of this scene and all it implied.

I should mention that during these two months—which seemed a long life to me from the novelty and intensity of the pleasures and pains I underwent—my diseased participation in other people's consciousness continued to torment me; now it was my father, and now my brother, now Mrs. Filmore or her husband, and now our German courier, whose stream of thought rushed upon me like a ringing in the ears not to be got rid of, though it allowed my own impulses and ideas to continue their uninterrupted course. It was like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness. The weariness and disgust of this involuntary intrusion into other souls was counteracted only by my ignorance of Bertha, and my growing passion for her; a passion enormously stimulated, if not produced by that ignorance. She was my oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge. I had never allowed my diseased condition to betray itself, or to drive me into any unusual speech or action, except once, when, in a moment of peculiar bitterness against my brother, I had forestalled some word which I knew he was going to utter—a clever observation, which he had prepared beforehand. He had occasionally a slightly-affected hesitation in his speech, and when he paused an instant after the second word, my impatience

and jealousy impelled me to continue the speech for him, as if it were something we had both learned by rote. He coloured and looked astonished, as well as annoyed; and the words had no sooner escaped my lips than I felt a shock of alarm lest such an anticipation of words—very far from being words of course, easy to divine—should have betrayed me as an exceptional being, a sort of quiet energumen, whom everyone, Bertha above all, would shudder at and avoid. But I magnified, as usual, the impression any word or deed of mine could produce on others; for no one gave any sign of having noticed my interruption as more than a rudeness, to be forgiven me on the score of my feeble nervous condition.

While this superadded consciousness of the actual was almost constant with me, I had never had a recurrence of that distinct prevision which I have described in relation to my first interview with Bertha; and I was waiting with eager curiosity to know whether or not my vision of Prague would prove to have been an instance of the same kind. A few days after the incident of the opal ring, we were paying one of our frequent visits to the Lichtenberg Palace. I could never look at many pictures in succession; for pictures, when they are at all powerful, affect me so strongly that one or two exhaust all my capability of contemplation. This morning I had been looking at Giorgione's²³ picture of the cruel-eyed woman, said to be a likeness of Lucrezia Borgia²⁴. I had stood long alone before it, fascinated by the terrible reality of that cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects. Perhaps even then I should not have moved away, if the rest of the party had not returned to this room, and announced that they were going to the Belvedere Gallery to settle a bet which had arisen between my brother and

Mr. Filmore about a portrait. I followed them dreamily, and was hardly alive to what occurred till they had all gone up to the gallery, leaving me below ; for I refused to come within sight of another picture that day. I made my way to the Grand Terrace, since it was agreed that we should saunter in the garden when the dispute had been decided. I had been sitting here a short space, vaguely conscious of trim gardens, with a city and green hills in the distance, when, wishing to avoid the proximity of the sentinel, I rose and walked down the broad stone steps, intending to seat myself farther on in the gardens. Just as I reached the gravel-walk, I felt an arm slipped within mine, and a light hand gently pressing my wrist. In the same instant a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia. The gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha's arm being within mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly in darkness, out of which there gradually broke a dim firelight, and I felt myself sitting in my father's leather chair in the library at home. I knew the fireplace—the dogs for the wood-fire—the black marble chimneypiece with the white marble medallion of the dying Cleopatra in the centre. Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul ; the light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand—Bertha, my wife—with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress ; every hateful thought within her present to me. . .

“ Madman, idiot ! why don't you kill yourself, then ? ”

It was a moment of hell. I saw into her pitiless soul—saw its barren worldliness, its scorching hate—and felt it clothe me round like an air I was obliged to breathe. She came with her candle and stood over me with a bitter smile of contempt ; I saw the great emerald brooch on her bosom,

a studded serpent with diamond eyes. I shuddered—I despised this woman with the barren soul and mean thoughts; but I felt helpless before her, as if she clutched my bleeding heart, and would clutch it till the last drop of life-blood ebbed away. She was my wife, and we hated each other. Gradually the hearth, the dim library, the candle-light disappeared—seemed to melt away into a background of light, the green serpent with the diamond eyes remaining a dark image on the retina. Then I had a sense of my eyelids quivering, and the living daylight broke in upon me; I saw gardens, and heard voices; I was seated on the steps of the Belvedere Terrace, and my friends were round me.

The tumult of mind into which I was thrown by this hideous vision made me ill for several days, and prolonged our stay at Vienna. I shuddered with horror as the scene recurred to me; and it recurred constantly, with all its minutiae, as if they had been burnt into my memory; and yet, such is the madness of the human heart under the influence of its immediate desires, I felt a wild hell-braving joy that Bertha was to be mine; for the fulfilment of my former prevision concerning her first appearance before me, left me little hope that this last hideous glimpse of the future was the mere diseased play of my own mind, and had no relation to external realities. One thing alone I looked towards as a possible means of casting doubt on my terrible conviction—the discovery that my vision of Prague had been false—and Prague was the next city on our route.

Meanwhile, I was no sooner in Bertha's society again, than I was as completely under her sway as before. What if I saw into the heart of Bertha, the matured woman—Bertha, my wife? Bertha, the *girl*, was a fascinating secret to me still: I trembled under her touch; I felt the witchery of her presence; I yearned to be assured of her love. The

fear of poison is feeble against the sense of thirst. Nay, I was just as jealous of my brother as before—just as much irritated by his small patronising ways ; for my pride, my diseased sensibility were there as they had always been, and winced as inevitably under every offence as my eye winced from an intruding mote. The future, even when brought within the compass of feeling by a vision that made me shudder, had still no more than the force of an idea, compared with the force of present emotion of my love for Bertha, of my dislike and jealousy towards my brother.

It is an old story, that men sell themselves to the tempter, and sign a bond with their blood, because it is only to take effect at a distant day ; then rush on to snatch the cup their souls thirst after with an impulse not the less savage because there is a dark shadow beside them for evermore. There is no short cut, no patent tram-road, to wisdom : after all the centuries of invention, the soul's path lies through the thorny wilderness which must be still trodden in solitude, with bleeding feet, with sobs for help, as it was trodden by them of old time.

My mind speculated eagerly on the means by which I should become my brother's successful rival, for I was still too timid, in my ignorance of Bertha's actual feeling, to venture on any step that would urge from her an avowal of it. I thought I should gain confidence even for this, if my vision of Prague proved to have been veracious ; and yet, the horror of that certitude ! Behind the slim girl Bertha, whose words and looks I watched for, whose touch was bliss, there stood continually that Bertha with the fuller form, the harder eyes, the more rigid mouth—with the barren, selfish soul laid bare ; no longer a fascinating secret, but a measured fact, urging itself perpetually on my unwilling sight. Are you unable to give me your sympathy—you who read this ? - Are you unable to imagine this double

consciousness at work within me, flowing on like two parallel streams which never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue? Yet you must have known something of the presentiments that spring from an insight at war with passion; and my visions were only like presentiments intensified to horror. You have known the powerlessness of ideas before the might of impulse; and my visions, when once they had passed into memory, were mere ideas—pale shadows that beckoned in vain, while my hand was grasped by the living and the loved.

In after-days I thought with bitter regret that if I had foreseen something more or something different—if instead of that hideous vision which poisoned the passion it could not destroy, or if even along with it I could have had a foreshadowing of that moment when I looked on my brother's face for the last time, some softening influence would have been shed over my feeling towards him: pride and hatred would surely have been subdued into pity, and the record of those hidden sins would have been shortened. But this is one of the vain thoughts with which we men flatter ourselves. We try to believe that the egoism within us would have easily been melted, and that it was only the narrowness of our knowledge which hemmed in our generosity, our awe, our human piety, and hindered them from submerging our hard indifference to the sensations and emotions of our fellows. Our tenderness and self-renunciation seem strong when our egoism has had its day—when, after our mean striving for a triumph that is to be another's loss, the triumph comes suddenly, and we shudder at it, because it is held out by the chill hand of death.

Our arrival in Prague happened at night, and I was glad of this, for it seemed like a deferring of a terribly decisive moment, to be in the city for hours without seeing it. As we were not to remain long in Prague, but to go on speedily

to Dresden, it was proposed that we should drive out the next morning and take a general view of the place, as well as visit some of its specially interesting spots, before the heat became oppressive—for we were in August, and the season was hot and dry. But it happened that the ladies were rather late at their morning toilet, and to my father's politely-repressed but perceptible annoyance, we were not in the carriage till the morning was far advanced. I thought with a sense of relief, as we entered the Jews' quarter, where we were to visit the old synagogue, that we should be kept in this flat, shut-up part of the city, until we should all be too tired and too warm to go farther, and so we should return without seeing more than the streets through which we had already passed. That would give me another day's suspense—suspense, the only form in which a fearful spirit knows the solace of hope. But, as I stood under the blackened, groined arches of that old synagogue, made dimly visible by the seven thin candles in the sacred lamp, while our Jewish cicerone reached down the Book of the Law, and read to us in its ancient tongue—I felt a shuddering impression that this strange building, with its shrunken lights, this surviving withered remnant of mediæval Judaism, was of a piece with my vision. Those darkened dusty Christian saints, with their loftier arches and their larger candles, needed the consolatory scorn with which they might point to a more shrivelled death-in-life than their own.

As I expected, when we left the Jews' quarter the elders of our party wished to return to the hotel. But now, instead of rejoicing in this, as I had done beforehand, I felt a sudden overpowering impulse to go on at once to the bridge, and put an end to the suspense I had been wishing to protract. I declared, with unusual decision, that I would get out of the carriage and walk on alone; they might return

without me. My father, thinking this merely a sample of my usual "poetic nonsense," objected that I should only do myself harm by walking in the heat; but when I persisted, he said angrily that I might follow my own absurd devices but that Schmidt (our courier) must go with me. I assented to this, and set off with Schmidt towards the bridge. I had no sooner passed from under the archway of the grand old gate leading on to the bridge, than a trembling seized me, and I turned cold under the midday sun; yet I went on; I was in search of something—a small detail which I remembered with special intensity as part of my vision. There it was—the patch of rainbow light on the pavement transmitted through a lamp in the shape of a star.

* * * * *

Before the autumn was at an end, and while the brown leaves still stood thick on the beeches in our park, my brother and Bertha were engaged to each other, and it was understood that their marriage was to take place early in the next spring. In spite of the certainty I had felt from that moment on the bridge at Prague, that Bertha would one day be my wife, my constitutional timidity and distrust had continued to benumb me, and the words in which I had sometimes premeditated a confession of my love, had died away unuttered. The same conflict had gone on within me as before—the longing for an assurance of love from Bertha's lips, the dread lest a word of contempt and denial should fall upon me like a corrosive acid. What was the conviction of a distant necessity to me? I trembled under a present glance, I hungered after a present joy, I was clogged and chilled by a present fear. And so the days passed on: I witnessed Bertha's engagement and heard her marriage discussed as if I were under a conscious nightmare—knowing it was a dream that would vanish, but feeling stifled under the grasp of hard-clutching fingers.

When I was not in Bertha's presence—and I was with her very often, for she continued to treat me with a playful patronage that wakened no jealousy in my brother—I spent my time chiefly in wandering, in strolling, or taking long rides while the daylight lasted, and then shutting myself up with my unread books ; for books had lost the power of chaining my attention. My self-consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it. I felt a sort of pitying anguish over the pathos of my own lot : the lot of a being finely organized for pain, but with hardly any fibres that responded to pleasure—to whom the idea of future evil robbed the present of its joy, and for whom the idea of future good did not still the uneasiness of a present yearning or a present dread. I went dumbly through that stage of the poet's suffering, in which he feels the delicious pang of utterance, and makes an image of his sorrows.

I was left entirely without remonstrance concerning this dreamy wayward life : I knew my father's thought about me : "That lad will never be good for anything in life : he may waste his years in an insignificant way on the income that falls to him : I shall not trouble myself about a career for him."

One mild morning in the beginning of November, it happened that I was standing outside the portico patting lazy old Cæsar, a Newfoundland almost blind with age, the only dog that ever took any notice of me—for the very dogs shunned me, and fawned on the happier people about me—when the groom brought up my brother's horse which was to carry him to the hunt, and my brother himself appeared at the door, florid, broad-chested, and self-complacent, feeling what a good-natured fellow he was not to behave insolently to us all on the strength of his great advantages.

"Latimer, old boy," he said to me in a tone of compassionate cordiality, "what a pity it is you don't have a run with the hounds now and then! The finest thing in the world for low spirits!"

"Low spirits!" I thought bitterly, as he rode away; "that is the sort of phrase with which coarse, narrow natures like yours think to describe experience of which you can know no more than your horse knows. It is to such as you that the good of this world falls: ready dulness, healthy selfishness, good-tempered conceit—these are the keys to happiness."

The quick thought came, that my selfishness was even stronger than his—it was only a suffering selfishness instead of an enjoying one. But then, again, my exasperating insight into Alfred's self-complacent soul, his freedom from all the doubts and fears, the unsatisfied yearnings, the exquisite tortures of sensitiveness, that had made the web of my life, seemed to absolve me from all bonds towards him. This man needed no pity, no love; those fine influences would have been as little felt by him as the delicate white mist is felt by the rock it caresses. There was no evil in store for *him*: if he was not to marry Bertha, it would be because he had found a lot pleasanter to himself.

Mr. Filmore's house lay not more than half a mile beyond our own gates, and whenever I knew my brother was gone in another direction, I went there for the chance of finding Bertha at home. Later on in the day I walked thither. By a rare accident she was alone, and we walked out in the grounds together, for she seldom went on foot beyond the trimly-swept gravel-walks. I remember what a beautiful sylph she looked to me as the low November sun shone on her blond hair, and she tripped along teasing

me with her usual light banter, to which I listened half fondly, half moodily; it was all the sign Bertha's mysterious inner self ever made to me. To-day perhaps the moodiness predominated, for I had not yet shaken off the access of jealous hate which my brother had raised in me by his parting patronage. Suddenly I interrupted and startled her by saying, almost fiercely, "Bertha, how can you love Alfred?"

She looked at me with surprise for a moment, but soon her light smile came again, and she answered sarcastically, "Why do you suppose I love him?"

"How can you ask that, Bertha?"

"What! your wisdom thinks I must love the man I'm going to marry? The most unpleasant thing in the world. I should quarrel with him; I should be jealous of him; our *ménage*²⁵ would be conducted in a very ill-bred manner. A little quiet contempt contributes greatly to the elegance of life."

"Bertha, that is not your real feeling. Why do you delight in trying to deceive me by inventing such cynical speeches?"

"I need never take the trouble of invention in order to deceive you, my small Tasso²⁶"—(that was the mocking name she usually gave me). "The easiest way to deceive a poet is to tell him the truth."

She was testing the validity of her epigram in a daring way, and for a moment the shadow of my vision—the Bertha whose soul was no secret to me—passed between me and the radiant girl, the playful syph whose feelings were a fascinating mystery. I suppose I must have shuddered, or betrayed in some other way my momentary chill of horror.

"Tasso!" she said, seizing my wrist, and peeping round into my face, "are you really beginning to discern

what a heartless girl I am ! Why, you are not half the poet I thought you were ; you are actually capable of believing the truth about me."

The shadow passed from between us, and was no longer the object nearest to me. The girl whose light fingers grasped me, whose elfish charming face looked into mine—who, I thought, was betraying an interest in my feelings that she would not have directly avowed—this warm breathing presence again possessed my senses and imagination like a returning siren melody which had been overpowered for an instant by the roar of threatening waves. It was a moment as delicious to me as the waking up to a consciousness of youth after a dream of middle age. I forgot everything but my passion, and said with swimming eyes :

"Bertha, shall you love me when we are first married ? I wouldn't mind if you really loved me only for a little while."

Her look of astonishment, as she loosed my hand and started away from me, recalled me to a sense of my strange, my criminal indiscretion.

"Forgive me," I said, hurriedly, as soon as I could speak again ; "I did not know what I was saying."

"Ah, Tasso's mad fit has come on, I see," she answered quietly, for she had recovered herself sooner than I had. "Let him go home and keep his head cool. I must go in, for the sun is setting."

I left her—full of indignation against myself. I had let slip words which, if she reflected on them, might rouse in her a suspicion of my abnormal mental condition—a suspicion which of all things I dreaded. And besides that, I was ashamed of the apparent baseness I had committed in uttering them to my brother's betrothed wife. I wandered home slowly, entering our park through a private

gate instead of by the lodges. "As I approached the house, I saw a man dashing off at full speed from the stable-yard across the park. Had any accident happened at home? No; perhaps it was only one of my father's peremptory business errands that required this headlong haste.

Nevertheless I quickened my pace without any distinct motive, and was soon at the house. I will not dwell on the scene I found there. My brother was dead—had been pitched from his horse, and killed on the spot by a concussion of the brain.

I went up to the room where he lay, and where my father was seated beside him with a look of rigid despair. I had shunned my father more than anyone since our return home, for the radical antipathy between our natures made my insight into his inner self a constant affliction to me. But now, as I went up to him, and stood beside him in sad silence, I felt the presence of a new element that blended us as we had never been blent before. My father had been one of the most successful men in the money-getting world: he had had no sentimental sufferings, no illness. The heaviest trouble that had befallen him was the death of his first wife. But he married my mother soon after; and I remember he seemed exactly the same, to my keen childish observation, the week after her death as before. But now, at last, a sorrow had come—the sorrow of old age, which suffers the more from the crushing of its pride and its hopes, in proportion as the pride and hope are narrow and prosaic. His son was to have been married soon—would probably have stood for the borough at the next election. That son's existence was the best motive that could be alleged for making new purchases of land every year to round off the estate. It is a dreary thing to live on doing the same things year after year, without knowing why we do them. Perhaps the tragedy of disappointed youth and passion is

less piteous than the tragedy of disappointed age and worldliness.

As I saw into the desolation of my father's heart, I felt a movement of deep pity towards him, which was the beginning of a new affection—an affection that grew and strengthened in spite of the strange bitterness with which he regarded me in the first month or two after my brother's death. If it had not been for the softening influence of my compassion for him—the first deep compassion I had ever felt—I should have been stung by the perception that my father transferred the inheritance of an eldest son to me with a mortified sense that the fate had compelled him to the unwelcome course of caring for me as an important being. It was only in spite of himself that he began to think of me with anxious regard. There is hardly any neglected child for whom death has made vacant a more favoured place, who will not understand what I mean.

Gradually, however, my new deference to his wishes, the effect of that patience which was born of my pity for him, won upon his affection, and he began to please himself with the endeavour to make me fill my brother's place as fully as my feebler personality would admit. I saw that the prospect which by and by presented itself of my becoming Bertha's husband was welcome to him, and he even contemplated in my case what he had not intended in my brother's—that his son and daughter-in-law should make one household with him. My softened feeling towards my father made this the happiest time I had known since childhood—these last months in which I retained the delicious illusion of loving Bertha, of longing and doubting and hoping that she might love me. She behaved with a certain new consciousness and distance towards me after my brother's death; and I too was under a double

constraint—that of delicacy towards my brother's memory, and of anxiety as to the impression my abrupt words had left on her mind. But the additional screen this mutual reserve erected between us only brought me more completely under her power: no matter how empty the adytum, so that the veil be thick enough. So absolute is our soul's need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life, that if the whole future were laid bare to us beyond to-day, the interest of all mankind would be bent on the hours that lie between; we should pant after the uncertainties of our one morning and our one afternoon; we should rush fiercely to the Exchange²⁷ for our last possibility of speculation, of success, of disappointment: we should have a glut of political prophets foretelling a crisis or a no-crisis within the only twenty-four hours left open to prophecy. Conceive the condition of the human mind if all propositions whatsoever were self-evident except one, which was to become self-evident at the close of a summer's day, but in the meantime might be the subject of question, of hypothesis, of debate. Art and philosophy, literature and science, would fasten like bees on that one proposition which had the honey of probability in it, and be the more eager because their enjoyment would end with sunset. Our impulses, our spiritual activities, no more adjust themselves to the idea of their future nullity, than the beating of our heart, or the irritability of our muscles.

Bertha, the slim, fair-haired girl, whose present thoughts and emotions were an enigma to me amidst the fatiguing obviousness of the other minds around me, was as absorbing to me as a single unknown to-day—as a single hypothetic proposition to remain problematic till sunset; and all the cramped, hemmed-in belief and disbelief, trust and distrust, of my nature, welled out in this one narrow channel.

And she made me believe that she loved me. Without ever quitting her tone of *badinage* and playful superiority, she intoxicated me with the sense that I was necessary to her, that she was never at ease unless I was near her, submitting to her playful tyranny. It costs a woman so little effort to besot us in this way. A half-repressed word, a moment's unexpected silence, even an easy fit of petulance on our account, will serve us as *hashish* for a long while. Out of the subtlest web of scarcely perceptible signs, she set me weaving the fancy that she had always unconsciously loved me better than Alfred, but that, with the ignorant fluttered sensibility of a young girl, she had been imposed on by the charm that lay for her in the distinction of being admired and chosen by a man who made so brilliant a figure in the world as my brother. She satirised herself in a very graceful way for her vanity and ambition. What was it to me that I had the light of my wretched prevision on the fact that now it was I who possessed at least all but the personal part of my brother's advantages? Our sweet illusions are half of them conscious illusions, like effects of colour that we know to be made up of tinsel, broken glass, and rags.

We were married eighteen months after Alfred's death, one cold, clear morning in April, when there came hail and sunshine both together; and Bertha, in her white silk and pale-green leaves, and the pale hues of her hair and face looked like the spirit of the morning. My father was happier than he had thought of being again: my marriage, he felt sure, would complete the desirable modification of my character, and make me practical and worldly enough to take my place in society among sane men. For he delighted in Bertha's tact and acuteness, and felt sure she would be mistress of me, and make me what she chose: I was only twenty-one, and madly in love with her. Poor father!

He kept that hope a little while after our first year of marriage, and it was not quite extinct when paralysis came and saved him from utter disappointment.

I shall hurry through the rest of my story, not dwelling so much as I have hitherto done on my inward experience. When people are well-known to each other, they talk rather of what befalls them externally, leaving their feelings and sentiments to be inferred.

We lived in a round of visits for some time after our return home, giving splendid dinner-parties, and making a sensation in our neighbourhood by the new lustre of our equipage, for my father had reserved this display of his increased wealth for the period of his son's marriage; and we gave our acquaintances liberal opportunity for remarking that it was a pity I made so poor a figure as an heir and a bridegroom. The nervous fatigue of this existence, the insincerities and platitudes which I had to live through twice over—through my inner and outward sense—would have been maddening to me, if I had not had that sort of intoxicated callousness which came from the delights of a first passion. A bride and bridegroom, surrounded by all the appliances of wealth, hurried through the day by the whirl of society, filling their solitary moments with hastily-snatched caresses, are prepared for their future life together as the novice is prepared for the cloister—by experiencing its utmost contrast.

Through all these crowded excited months, Bertha's inward self remained shrouded from me, and I still read her thoughts only through the language of her lips and demeanour: I had still the human interest of wondering whether what I did and said pleased her, of longing to hear a word of affection, of giving a delicious exaggeration of meaning to her smile. But I was conscious of a growing difference in her manner towards me; sometimes strong

enough to be called haughty coldness, cutting and chilling me as the hail had done that came across the sunshine on our marriage morning; sometimes only perceptible in the dexterous avoidance of a *tête-à-tête* walk or dinner to which I had been looking forward. I had been deeply pained by this—had even felt a sort of crushing of the heart, from the sense that my brief day of happiness was near its setting; but still I remained dependent on Bertha, eager for the last rays of a bliss that would soon be gone for ever, hoping and watching for some afterglow more beautiful from the impending night.

I remember—how should I not remember?—the time when that dependance and hope utterly left me, when the sadness I had felt in Bertha's growing estrangement became a joy that I looked back upon with longing as a man might look back on the last pains in a paralysed limb. It was just after the close of my father's last illness, which had necessarily withdrawn us from society and thrown us more upon each other. It was the evening of my father's death. On that evening the veil which had shrouded Bertha's soul from me—had made me find in her alone among my fellow-beings the blessed possibility of mystery, and doubt, and expectation—was first withdrawn. Perhaps it was the first day since the beginning of my passion for her, in which that passion was completely neutralised by the presence of an absorbing feeling of another kind. I had been watching by my father's deathbed: I had been witnessing the last fitful yearning glance his soul had cast back on the spent inheritance of life—the last faint consciousness of love he had gathered from the pressure of my hand. What are all our personal loves when we have been sharing in that supreme agony? In the first moments when we came away from the presence of death, every other relation to the living is merged, to our feeling, in the great relation of a common

nature and a common destiny.

In that state of mind I joined Bertha in her private sitting-room. She was seated in a leaning posture on a settee, with her back towards the door; the great rich coils of her pale blond hair surmounting her small neck, visible above the back of the settee. I remember, as I closed the door behind me, a cold tremulousness seizing me, and a vague sense of being hated and lonely—vague and strong, like a presentiment. I know how I looked at that moment, for I saw myself in Bertha's thought as she lifted her cutting grey eyes, and looked at me: a miserable ghost-seer, surrounded by phantoms in the noonday, trembling under a breeze when the leaves were still, without appetite for the common objects of human desires, but pining after the moonbeams. We were front to front with each other, and judged each other. The terrible moment of complete illumination had come to me, and I saw that the darkness had hidden no landscape from me, but only a blank prosaic wall: from that evening forth, through the sickening years which followed, I saw all round the narrow room of this woman's soul—saw petty artifice and mere negation where I had delighted to believe in coy sensibilities and in wit at war with latent feeling—saw the light floating vanities of the girl defining themselves into the systematic coquetry, the scheming selfishness, of the woman—saw repulsion and antipathy harden into cruel hatred, giving pain only for the sake of wreaking itself.

For Bertha too, after her kind, felt the bitterness of disillusion. She had believed that my wild poet's passion for her would make me her slave; and that, being her slave, I should execute her will in all things. With the essential shallowness of a negative, unimaginative nature, she was unable to conceive the fact that sensibilities were anything else than weaknesses. She had thought my weaknesses

would put me in her power, and she found them unmanageable forces. Our positions were reversed. Before marriage she had completely mastered my imagination, for she was a secret to me; and I created the unknown thought before which I trembled as if it were hers. But now that her soul was laid open to me, now that I was compelled to share the privacy of her motives, to follow all the petty devices that preceded her words and acts, she found herself powerless with me, except to produce in me the chill shudder of repulsion—powerless, because I could be acted on by no lever within her reach. I was dead to worldly ambitions, to social vanities, to all the incentives within the compass of her narrow imagination, and I lived under influences utterly invisible to her.

She was really pitiable to have such a husband, and so all the world thought. A graceful, brilliant woman, like Bertha, who smiled on morning callers, made a figure in ballrooms, and was capable of that light repartee which, from such a woman, is accepted as wit, was secure of carrying off all sympathy from a husband who was sickly, abstracted, and, as some suspected, crack-brained. Even the servants in our house gave her the balance of their regard and pity. For there were no audible quarrels between us; our alienation, our repulsion from each other, lay within the silence of our own hearts; and if the mistress went out a great deal, and seemed to dislike the master's society, was it not natural, poor thing? The master was odd. I was kind and just to my dependants, but I excited in them a shrinking, half-contemptuous pity; for this class of men and women are but slightly determined in their estimate of others by general considerations, or even experience, of character. They judge of persons as they judge of coins, and value those who pass current at a high rate.

After a time I interfered so little with Bertha's habits that it might seem wonderful how her hatred towards me could grow so intense and active as it did. But she had begun to suspect, by some involuntary betrayal of mine, that there was an abnormal power of penetration in me—that fitfully, at least, I was strangely cognisant of her thoughts and intentions, and she began to be haunted by a terror of me, which alternated every now and then with defiance. She meditated continually how the incubus could be shaken off her life—how she could be freed from this hateful bond to a being whom she at once despised as an imbecile, and dreaded as an inquisitor. For a long while she lived in the hope that my evident wretchedness would drive me to the commission of suicide; but suicide was not in my nature. I was too completely swayed by the sense that I was in the grasp of unknown forces, to believe in my power of self-release. Towards my own destiny I had become entirely passive; for my one ardent desire had spent itself, and impulse no longer predominated over knowledge. For this reason I never thought of taking any steps towards a complete separation, which would have made our alienation evident to the world. Why should I rush for help to a new course, when I was only suffering from the consequences of a deed which had been the act of my intensest will? That would have been the logic of one who had desires to gratify, and I had no desires. But Bertha and I lived more and more aloof from each other. The rich find it easy to live married and apart.

That course of our life which I have indicated in a few sentences filled the space of years. So much misery—so slow and hideous a growth of hatred and sin, may be compressed into a sentence! And men judge of each other's lives through this summary medium. They epitomize the experience of their fellow-mortal, and pronounce judgment

on him in neat syntax, and feel themselves wise and virtuous—conquerors over the temptations they define in well-selected predicates. Seven years of wretchedness glide glibly over the lips of the man who has never counted them out in moments of chill disappointment, of head and heart throbbings, of dread and vain wrestling, of remorse and despair. We learn *words* by rote, but not their meaning; *that* must be paid for with our life-blood, and printed in the subtle fibres of our nerves.

But I will hasten to finish my story. Brevity is justified at once to those who readily understand, and to those who will never understand.

Some years after my father's death, I was sitting by the dim firelight in my library one January evening—sitting in the leather chair that used to be my father's—when Bertha appeared at the door, with a candle in her hand, and advanced towards me. I knew the ball-dress she had on—the white ball-dress, with the green jewels, shone upon by the light of the wax candle which lit up the medallion of the dying Cleopatra on the mantelpiece. Why did she come to me before going out? I had not seen her in the library, which was my habitual place for months. Why did she stand before me with the candle in her hand, with her cruel contemptuous eyes fixed on me, and the glittering serpent, like a familiar demon, on her breast? For a moment I thought this fulfilment of my vision at Vienna marked some dreadful crisis in my fate, but I saw nothing in Bertha's mind, as she stood before me, except scorn for the look of overwhelming misery with which I sat before her
“Fool, idiot, why don't you kill yourself, then?”—that was her thought. But at length her thoughts reverted to her errand, and she spoke aloud. The apparently indifferent nature of the errand seemed to make a ridiculous anticlimax to my prevision and my agitation.”

"I have had to hire a new maid. Fletcher is going to be married, and she wants me to ask you to let her husband have the public-house and farm at Molton. I wish him to have it. You must give the promise now, because Fletcher is going to-morrow morning—and quickly, because I'm in a hurry."

"Very well; you may promise her," I said, indifferently, and Bertha swept out of the library again.

I always shrank from the sight of a new person, and all the more when it was a person whose mental life was likely to weary my reluctant insight with worldly ignorant trivialities. But I shrank especially from the sight of this new maid, because her advent had been announced to me at a moment to which I could not cease to attach some fatality: I had a vague dread that I should find her mixed up with the dreary drama of my life—that some new sickening vision would reveal her to me as an evil genius. When at last I did unavoidably meet her, the vague dread was changed into definite disgust. She was a tall, wiry, dark-eyed woman, this Mrs. Archer, with a face handsome enough to give her coarse hard nature the odious finish of bold, self-confident coquetry. That was enough to make me avoid her, quite apart from the contemptuous feeling with which she contemplated me. I seldom saw her; but I perceived that she rapidly became a favourite with her mistress, and after the lapse of eight or nine months, I began to be aware that there had arisen in Bertha's mind towards this woman a mingled feeling of fear and dependence, and that this feeling was associated with ill-defined images of candlelight scenes in her dressing-room, and the locking-up of something in Bertha's cabinet. My interviews with my wife had become so brief and so rarely solitary, that I had no opportunity of perceiving these images in her mind with more definiteness. The recollections of the past become

contracted in the rapidity of thought till they sometimes bear hardly a more distinct resemblance to the external reality than the forms of an oriental alphabet to the objects that suggested them.

Besides, for the last year or more a modification had been going forward in my mental condition, and was growing more and more marked. My insight into the minds of those around me was becoming dimmer and more fitful, and the ideas that crowded my double consciousness became less and less dependent on any personal contact. All that was personal in me seemed to be suffering a gradual death, so that I was losing the organ through which the personal agitations and projects of others could affect me. But along with this relief from wearisome insight, there was a new development of what I concluded—as I have since found rightly—to be a prevision of external scenes. It was as if the relation between me and my fellow-men was more and more deadened, and my relation to what we call the inanimate was quickened into new life. The more I lived apart from society, and in proportion as my wretchedness subsided from the violent throb of agonised passion into the dulness of habitual pain, the more frequent and vivid became such visions as that I had had of Prague—of strange cities, of sandy plains, of gigantic ruins, of midnight skies with strange bright constellations, of mountain-passes, of grassy nooks flecked with the afternoon sunshine through the boughs: I was in the midst of such scenes, and in all of them one presence seemed to weigh on me in all these mighty shapes—the presence of something unknown and pitiless. For continual suffering had annihilated religious faith within me: to the utterly miserable—the unloving and the unloved—there is no religion possible, no worship but a worship of devils. And beyond all these, and continually recurring, was the vision of my

death—the pangs, the suffocation, the last struggle, when life would be grasped at in vain.

Things were in this state near the end of the seventh year. I had become entirely free from insight, from my abnormal cognisance of any other consciousness than my own, and instead of intruding involuntarily into the world of other minds, was living continually in my own solitary future. Bertha was aware that I was greatly changed. To my surprise she had of late seemed to seek opportunities of remaining in my society, and had cultivated that kind of distant yet familiar talk which is customary between a husband and wife who live in polite and irrevocable alienation. I bore this with languid submission, and without feeling enough interest in her motives to be roused into keen observation ; yet I could not help perceiving something triumphant and excited in her carriage and the expression of her face—something too subtle to express itself in words or tones, but giving one the idea that she lived in a state of expectation or hopeful suspense. My chief feeling was satisfaction that her inner self was once more shut out from me ; and I almost revelled for the moment in the absent melancholy that made me answer her at cross purposes, and betray utter ignorance of what she had been saying. I remember well the look and the smile with which she one day said, after a mistake of this kind on my part : “ I used to think you were a clairvoyant, and that was the reason why you were so bitter against other clairvoyants, wanting to keep your monopoly ; but I see now you have become rather duller than the rest of the world.”

I said nothing in reply. It occurred to me that her recent obtrusion of herself upon me might have been prompted by the wish to test my power of detecting some of her secrets ; but I let the thought drop again at once : her motives and her deeds had no interest for me, and what-

ever pleasures she might be seeking, I had no wish to baulk her. There was still pity in my soul for every living thing, and Bertha was living—was surrounded with possibilities of misery.

Just at this time there occurred an event which roused me somewhat from my inertia, and gave me an interest in the passing moment that I had thought impossible for me. It was a visit from Charles Meunier, who had written me word that he was coming to England for relaxation from too strenuous labour, and would like to see me. Meunier had now a European reputation ; but his letter to me expressed that keen remembrance of an early regard, an early debt of sympathy, which is inseparable from nobility of character : and I too felt as if his presence would be to me like a transient resurrection into a happier pre-existence.

He came, and as far as possible, I renewed our old pleasure of making *tête-à-tête* excursions, though, instead of mountains and glaciers and the wide blue lake, we had to content ourselves with mere slopes and ponds and artificial plantations. The years had changed us both, but with what different result ! Meunier was now a brilliant figure in society, to whom elegant women pretended to listen, and whose acquaintance was boasted of by noblemen ambitious of brains. He repressed with the utmost delicacy all betrayal of the shock which I am sure he must have received from our meeting, or of a desire to penetrate into my condition and circumstances, and sought by the utmost exertion of his charming social powers to make our reunion agreeable. Bertha was much struck by the unexpected fascination of a visitor whom she had expected to find presentable only on the score of his celebrity, and put forth all her coquetties and accomplishments. Apparently she succeeded in attracting his admiration, for his manner towards her was attentive and flattering. The effect of his presence on me

was so benignant, especially in those renewals of our old *tête-à-tête* wanderings, when he poured forth to me wonderful narratives of his professional experience, that more than once, when his talk turned on the psychological relations of disease, the thought crossed my mind that, if his stay with me were long enough, I might possibly bring myself to tell this man the secrets of my lot. Might there not lie some remedy for *me*, too, in his science? Might there not at least lie some comprehension and sympathy ready for me in his large and susceptible mind? But the thought only flickered feebly now and then, and died out before it could become a wish. The horror I had of again breaking in on the privacy of another soul, made me, by an irrational instinct, draw the shroud of concealment more closely around my own, as we automatically perform the gesture we feel to be wanting in another.

When Meunier's visit was approaching its conclusion, there happened an event which caused some excitement in our household, owing to the surprisingly strong effect it appeared to produce on Bertha—on Bertha, the self-possessed, who usually seemed inaccessible to feminine agitations, and did even her hate in a self-restrained hygienic manner. This event was the sudden severe illness of her maid, Mrs. Archer. I have reserved to this moment the mention of a circumstance which had forced itself on my notice shortly before Meunier's arrival, namely, that there had been some quarrel between Bertha and this maid, apparently during a visit to a distant family, in which she had accompanied her mistress. I had overheard Archer speaking in a tone of bitter insolence, which I should have thought an adequate reason for immediate dismissal. No dismissal followed; on the contrary, Bertha seemed to be silently putting up with personal inconveniences from the exhibitions of this woman's temper. I was the more

astonished to observe that her illness seemed a cause of strong solicitude to Bertha ; that she was at the bedside night and day, and would allow no one else to officiate as head-nurse. It happened that our family doctor was out on a holiday, an accident which made Meunier's presence in the house doubly welcome, and he apparently entered into the case with an interest which seemed so much stronger than the ordinary professional feeling, that one day when he had fallen into a long fit of silence after visiting her, I said to him :

"Is this a very peculiar case of disease, Meunier ?"

"No," he answered, "it is an attack of peritonitis, which will be fatal, but which does not differ physically from many other cases that have come under my observation. But I'll tell you what I have on my mind. I want to make an experiment on this woman, if you will give me permission. It can do her no harm—will give her no pain—for I shall not make it until life is extinct to all purposes of sensation. I want to try the effect of transfusing blood into her arteries after the heart has ceased to beat for some minutes. I have tried the experiment again and again with animals that have died of this disease, with astounding results, and I want to try it on a human subject. I have the small tubes necessary, in a case I have with me, and the rest of the apparatus could be prepared readily. I should use my own blood—take it from my own arm. This woman won't live through the night, I'm convinced, and I want you to promise me your assistance in making the experiment. I can't do without another hand, but it would perhaps not be well to call in a medical assistant from among your provincial doctors. A disagreeable foolish version of the thing might get abroad."

"Have you spoken to my wife on the subject ?" I said, "because she appears to be peculiarly sensitive about this woman : she has been a favourite maid."

"To tell you the truth," said Meunier, "I don't want her to know about it. There are always insuperable difficulties with women in these matters, and the effect on the supposed dead body may be startling. You and I will sit up together, and be in readiness. When certain symptoms appear I shall take you in, and at the right moment we must manage to get everyone else out of the room."

I need not give our farther conversation on the subject. He entered very fully into the details, and overcame my repulsion from them, by exciting in me a mingled awe and curiosity concerning the possible results of his experiment.

We prepared everything, and he instructed me in my part as assistant. He had not told Bertha of his absolute conviction that Archer would not survive through the night, and endeavoured to persuade her to leave the patient and take a night's rest. But she was obstinate, suspecting the fact that death was at hand, and supposing that he wished merely to save her nerves. She refused to leave the sickroom. Meunier and I sat up together in the library, he making frequent visits to the sickroom, and returning with the information that the case was taking precisely the course he expected. Once he said to me, "Can you imagine any cause of ill-feeling this woman has against her mistress, who is so devoted to her?"

"I think there was some misunderstanding between them before her illness. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have observed for the last five or six hours—since, I fancy, she has lost all hope of recovery—there seems a strange prompting in her to say something which pain and failing strength forbid her to utter; and there is a look of hideous meaning in her eyes, which she turns continually towards her mistress. In this disease the mind often remains singularly clear to the last."

"I am not surprised at an indication of malevolent feeling in her," I said. "She is a woman who has always inspired me with distrust and dislike, but she managed to insinuate herself into her mistress's favour." He was silent after this, looking at the fire with an air of absorption, till he went upstairs again. He stayed away longer than usual, and on returning, said to me quietly, "Come now."

I followed him to the chamber where death was hovering. The dark hangings of the large bed made a background that gave a strong relief to Bertha's pale face as I entered. She started forward as she saw me enter, and then looked at Meunier with an expression of angry inquiry; but he lifted up his hand as if to impose silence, while he fixed his glance on the dying woman and felt her pulse. The face was pinched and ghastly, a cold perspiration was on the forehead, and the eyelids were lowered so as to conceal the large dark eyes. After a minute or two, Meunier walked round to the other side of the bed where Bertha stood, and with his usual air of gentle politeness towards her begged her to leave the patient under our care—everything should be done for her—she was no longer in a state to be conscious of an affectionate presence. Bertha was hesitating, apparently almost willing to believe his assurance and to comply. She looked round at the ghastly dying face, as if to read the confirmation of that assurance when for a moment the lowered eyelids were raised again, and it seemed as if the eyes were looking towards Bertha, but blankly. A shudder passed through Bertha's frame, and she returned to her station near the pillow, tacitly implying that she would not leave the room.

The eyelids were lifted no more. Once I looked at Bertha as she watched the face of the dying one. She wore a rich *peignoir*, and her blond hair was half covered by a

lace cap : in her attire she was, as always, an elegant woman, fit to figure in a picture of modern aristocratic life : but I asked myself how that face of hers could ever have seemed to me the face of a woman born of woman, with memories of childhood, capable of pain, needing to be fondled ? The features at that moment seemed so preternaturally sharp, the eyes were so hard and eager—she looked like a cruel immortal, finding her spiritual feast in the agonies of a dying race. For across those hard features there came something like a flash when the last hour had been breathed out, and we all felt that the dark veil had completely fallen. What secret was there between Bertha and this woman ? I turned my eyes from her with a horrible dread lest my insight should return, and I should be obliged to see what had been breeding about two unloving women's hearts. I felt that Bertha had been watching for the moment of death as the sealing of her secret. I thanked Heaven it could remain sealed for me.

Meunier said quietly, "She is gone." He then gave his arm to Bertha, and she submitted to be led out of the room.

I suppose it was at her order that two female attendants came into the room, and dismissed the younger one who had been present before. When they entered, Meunier had already opened the artery in the long thin neck that lay rigid on the pillow, and I dismissed them, ordering them to remain at a distance till we rang : the doctor, I said, had an operation to perform—he was not sure about the death. For the next twenty minutes I forgot everything but Meunier and the experiment in which he was so absorbed, that I think his senses would have been closed against all sounds or sights which had no relation to it. It was my task at first to keep up the artificial respiration in the body after the transfusion had been effected, but presently Meunier

relieved me, and I could see the wondrous slow return of life; the breast began to heave, the inspirations became stronger, the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them. The artificial respiration was withdrawn: still the breathing continued, and there was a movement of the lips.

Just then I heard the handle of the door moving: I suppose Bertha had heard from the women that they had been dismissed: probably a vague fear had arisen in her mind, for she entered with a look of alarm. She came to the foot of the bed and gave a stifled cry.

The dead woman's eyes were wide open, and met hers in full recognition—the recognition of hate. With a sudden strenuous effort, the hand that Bertha had thought for ever still was pointing towards her, and the haggard face moved. The gasping eager voice said:

“You mean to poison your husband . . . the poison is in the black cabinet . . . I got it for you . . . you laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back, to make me disgusting . . . because you were jealous . . . are you sorry . . . now?”

The lips continued to murmur, but the sounds were no longer distinct. Soon there was no sound—only a slight movement: the flame had leaped out, and was being extinguished the faster. The wretched woman's heartstrings had been set to hatred and vengeance: the spirit of life had swept the chords for an instant, and was gone again for ever. Great God! Is this what it is to live again . . . to wake up with our unstilled thirst upon us, with our unuttered curses rising to our lips, with our muscles ready to act out their half-committed sins?

Bertha stood pale at the foot of the bed, quivering and helpless, despairing of devices, like a cunning animal whose hiding-places are surrounded by swift-advancing flame.

Even Meunier looked paralysed; life for that moment ceased to be a scientific problem to him. As for me, this scene seemed of one texture with the rest of my existence: horror was my familiar, and this new revelation was only like an old pain recurring with new circumstances.

* * * *

Since then Bertha and I have lived apart—she in her own neighbourhood, the mistress of half our wealth, I as a wanderer in foreign countries, until I came to this Devonshire nest to die. Bertha lives pitied and admired; for what had I against that charming woman, whom every one but myself could have been happy with? There had been no witness of the scene in the dying room except Meunier, and while Meunier lived his lips were sealed by a promise to me.

Once or twice, weary of wandering, I rested in a favourite spot, and my heart went out towards the men and women and children whose faces were becoming familiar to me; but I was driven away again in terror at the approach of my old insight—driven away to live continually with the one Unknown Presence revealed and yet hidden by the moving curtain of the earth and sky. Till at last disease took hold of me and forced me to rest here—forced me to live in dependence on my servants. And then the curse of insight—of my double consciousness, came again, and has never left me. I know all their narrow thoughts, their feeble regard, their half-wearied pity.

* * * *

It is the 20th of September, 1850. I know these figures I have just written, as if they were a long familiar inscription. I have seen them on this page in my desk unnumbered times, when the scene of my dying struggle has opened upon me. . . .

NOTES

¹ *Angina pectoris*: Spasms of the chest resulting from a diseased heart.

² *To reach the bell and pull it violently*: In days before electric bells of course.

³ *I thirsted for the unknown*: I longed to die.

⁴ *Ubi saeva indignatio ulterius cor lacerare nequit*: Where fierce indignation can no longer tear my heart.

⁵ *Swift*: A well-known satirical writer of the 18th century.

⁶ *Eton*: The most famous school of England. When he was there or at Oxford his education was mainly provided by a study of Greek and Latin authors, an education very limited in the knowledge it imparted but an excellent training for ordered and clear thinking. *Aeschylus*—Greek dramatist. *Horace*—a Latin poet. *Plutarch*—a Greek historian. *Don Quixote*—a famous book of humorous and kindly satire on the extravagances of mediæval romances by a Spaniard, Cervantes, about 1602.

⁷ *Mr. Letherall*: A phrenologist, a man who claimed to be able to tell ability and character from the shape of the skull.

⁸ *Geneva*: In Switzerland, a home for many people of different nationalities, who study or reside there. The secretariat of the League of Nations is at Geneva. It is situated in the beautiful mountains of the Swiss Alps.

⁹ *Jean Jacques*: J. J. Rousseau, the famous French philosopher.

¹⁰ *Gamins*: Urchins, street lads (French word).

¹¹ *Prague*: Now capital of the post-war state of Czecho-Slovakia, then part of the Austria-Hungary Empire.

¹² *Draught*: Medicine.

¹³ *Novalis*: Pseudonym of an eighteenth century German writer.

¹⁴ *Canaletto*: A Venetian painter, born 1697.

¹⁵ *Musical box*: A mechanical musical instrument before the days of the gramophone; it was able to play a few simple tunes.

¹⁶ *Cashmere*: The fine wool of the Kashmir goat.

¹⁷ *Water-nixie*: Water-sprite.

¹⁸ *Monsieur ne se trouve pas bien*: You are not well?

¹⁹ *Bien, monsieur*: Very well.

²⁰ *Salon*: Reception-room.

²¹ *Eau-de-Cologne*: Water of Cologne (French). A perfume made at Cologne in Germany.

²² *Bonne et brave femme*: A good-natured and worthy woman, but not slim and lovely like a nymph.

²³ *Giorgione*: An Italian painter.

²⁴ *Lucrezia Borgia*: Born in 1480, daughter of Pope Alexander VI (who was before that Cardinal Rodrigo Borgia) and brother to Caesar Borgia, both children of one of his mistresses. This Pope was an amazing man who gave no thought to his ecclesiastical position at all, but set out to make the Papacy the strongest secular power among the dukedoms and kingdoms into which the modern Italy was then split. He stopped at no crime, and in particular he and his family committed a series of murders by a clever use of poison. He was perhaps the most

unscrupulous product of the moral disturbances of the Italian Renaissance.

²⁵ *Menage* : Household.

²⁶ *Tasso* : Italian poet.

²⁷ *Exchange* : The Stock Exchange of London where shares in business companies are bought and sold. Some men make a living by speculating, i.e., buying shares not to keep but in the hope of selling them again at a profit.

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO¹

EDGAR ALLAN POE

1809—1849.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in America in 1809 in circumstances of poverty, but when he was three years old he was adopted by a rich, childless couple, with whom he spent some years of his boyhood in England. After his return to America he tried University life and then a military officer's training, but he could not settle down to either. Eventually he cut himself adrift from his adopted family, and succeeded after a struggle in making his name in literature. But he remained poor, grew ill (although strong as a lad), and took to alcohol and opium. He died early in 1849, but by that time he had written stories and criticism of the first rank, and certainly among the best ever turned out by an American author. Much of the pain and gloom and loneliness of his later life appears in his tales ("The play is the tragedy Man. And the hero the conquering worm" and "Nor was I ignorant of the flowers and wine but the hemlock and cypress overshadowed me night and day" are two of his remarks). But some of his imaginative stories remain by themselves to this day as examples of the art of such things, and his influence over the form of the story has been greater than that of any other author.

THE thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled—but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my goodwill. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

He had a weak point—this Fortunato—although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso² spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adapted to suit the time and opportunity—to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian millionaires. In painting and gemmary Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack—but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially: I was skilful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the Carnival season³ that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him, that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

I said to him, 'My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking to-day! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts.'

'How?' said he; 'Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the Carnival!'

'I have my doubts,' I replied; 'and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain.'

'Amontillado!'

'I have my doubts.'

'Amontillado!'

'And I must satisfy them.'

'Amontillado!'

'As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me——'

'Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry.'

'And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own.'

'Come, let us go.'

'Whither?'

'To your vaults.'

'My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good-nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi——'

'I have no engagement; come.'

'My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre.'

'Let us go nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon. And as for Luchesi he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado.'

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a *roquelaire* closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honour of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to ensure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

I took from their sconces two flambeaux, and giving one to Fortunato, bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of

the descent, and stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs⁴ of the Montresors.

The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode.

‘The pipe,’ said he.

‘It is farther on,’ said I; ‘but observe the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls.’

He turned towards me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication.

‘Nitrate?’ he asked, at length.

‘Nitrate,’ I replied. ‘How long have you had that cough?’

‘Ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh!—ugh! ugh! ugh! ugh! ugh! ugh!’

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

‘It is nothing,’ he said at last.

‘Come,’ I said, with decision, ‘we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi—’

‘Enough,’ he said, ‘the cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough.’

‘True—true,’ I replied; ‘and, indeed, I had no intention of alarming you unnecessarily—but you should use all proper caution. A draught of this Médoc⁵ will defend us from the damp.’

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mould.

‘Drink,’ I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.

'I drink,' he said, 'to the buried that repose around us.'

'And I to your long life.'

• He again took my arm, and we proceeded.

'These vaults,' he said, 'are extensive.'

'The Montresors,' I replied, 'were a great and numerous family.'

'I forget your arms.'⁶

'A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are embedded in the heel.'

'And the motto?'

'*Nemo me impune lacessit.*'⁷

'Good!' he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Médoc. We had passed through walls with piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.

'The nitre!' I said; 'see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough——'

'It is nothing,' he said; 'let us go on. But first, another draught of the Médoc.'

I broke and reached him a flagon of De Grâve.⁸ He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement—a grotesque one.

'You do not comprehend?' he said.

'Not I,' I replied.

'Then you are not of the brotherhood.'⁹

'How?'

'You are not of the masons.'

'Yes, yes,' I said; 'yes, yes.'

'You? Impossible! A mason?'

'A mason,' I replied.

'A sign,'¹⁰ he said.

'It is this,' I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire*.

'You jest,' he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. 'But let us proceed to the Amontillado.'

'Be it so,' I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak, and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily. We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavoured to pry into the depth of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.

‘Proceed,’ I said; ‘hèrein is the Amontillado.’ As for Luchesi——

• ‘He is an ignoramus,’ interrupted my friend, as he stepped unsteadily forward, while I followed immediately at his heels. In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet, horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key, I stepped back from the recess.

‘Pass your hand,’ I said, ‘over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power.’

‘The Amontillado!’ ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

‘True,’ I replied, ‘the Amontillado.’

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials, and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier; and the

third, and the fourth ; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labour and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated—I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess ; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamoured. I re-echoed—I aided—I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamourer grew still.

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh ; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight ; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said—

‘Ha ! ha ! ha !—he ! he !—a very good joke indeed—an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo—he ! he ! he !—over our wine—he ! he ! he !’

‘The Amontillado !’ I said.

'He! he! he!—he! he!—he! yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.'

'Yes', I said, 'let us be gone.'

'For the love of God, Montresor!'

'Yes,' I said, 'for the love of God!'

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply, I grew impatient. I called aloud—

'Fortunato!'

No answer. I called again—

'Fortunato!'

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick—on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labour. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*¹¹

NOTES.

¹ *Amontillado*: A place in Spain (Montilla) producing a wine (sherry) of the highest quality. Wines usually take their names from the district in which the vines grow which they are made from.

² *Virtuoso*: One who has a knowledge of works of 'virtu' and a taste for them, i.e., works of art of any kind. 'Virtu' is an Italian word.

³ *Carnival season*: The half-week before Lent, the period of fasting, during which the people in Roman Catholic countries like Italy (this story is told of Rome) make merry.

⁴ *Catacombs of the Montresors*: In Rome there are many extensive underground chambers where the dead used to be buried. Wines are very often stored in underground rooms to keep them cool.

⁵ *Médoc*: A French wine.

⁶ *I forget your arms*: The shield or painted device of a nobleman.

⁷ *Nemo me impune lacessit*: No one provokes me with impunity.

⁸ *De Grave*: A French wine.

⁹ *The brotherhood*: The order of Masons exists in lodges or groups all over the world and claims to have been in existence since very early historical times; the purpose of the members is to meet socially and to assist each other in distress. They have elaborate symbolic signs and

gestures in their greetings, drinking, and so on, which are carefully kept secret from those who are not members.

¹⁰ *A sign* : Show me one of our secret signs. Montresor produces instead a trowel, a tool or sign of a real mason or builder.

¹¹ *In pace requiescat* : Rest in peace.

PERCHANCE TO DREAM¹

MICHAEL JOYCE

This is a story reprinted from a recent issue of a London Magazine. It is an illustration of the considerable merit of work done to-day for magazines of quality by otherwise unknown writers as well as famous ones. Notice the absence of quotation marks in the conversation passages—a modern usage.

IT seemed to him that he was a commercial traveller, sitting in the corner of a third class smoker on a train bound for a small town on the East Coast. It seemed that he was making this journey not on account of business, but of some family affair. In his pocket, he knew, was a letter from his sister, the first she had written him for some years; an urgent letter begging for his help, yet so vague in its terms that he wondered whether she herself knew from what danger or misfortune she was asking him to save her. It seemed that her fears were in some way related to her husband, but she did not suggest ill-treatment; there was a reference to her little boy but she did not say that he was ill. He had never seen his sister's child, but, looking back into the dim past, he found an old dislike of her husband, whom he remembered as a tall, raw-boned, red-headed Scot, a chemist in a small way of business and a dabbler, he seemed to have been told, in chemical experiment.

The vagueness of the letter was tiresome to a man who, though he had no living interest in his sister and had made no effort to see her for several years, was yet too much a brother to leave her appeal unanswered; for there was no doubt that she longed for his support, whether in fact she needed it or not, and for this reason, perhaps, her ill-chosen words had given him uneasiness, her very poverty of

expression leaving in the mind a dim fear, too shadowy to combat. Such feelings, however, the traveller determined to ignore, finding it more comfortable to fancy that the husband's business was failing and that this was merely a request for money to avert impending bankruptcy—the plain meaning tortured into the likeness of an indefinable foreboding by the sense of shame that begging excites in decent people. So, his mind was at rest; he hoped that the loan—common sense would call it a gift—need not be large; but money was at least a thing he understood, and on this understanding he settled down to read a magazine for the rest of his journey.

This was not, it seemed, his first visit to the town; perhaps he had been there on business. On leaving the station he found that he knew how to reach the road his sister lived in, although he had certainly never called at the house itself. It was a desolate evening at the dead end of autumn; what few visitors the town could boast had left it long ago, and indeed it was hard to imagine what could ever have brought them there, for the front was low and undistinguished, the beach poor and dirty, the buildings cheap and tawdry; the speculators who had hoped to popularise the place had run mean streets of semi-villas out into the fields, where the roadway and the pavement petered out in heaps of rubble and clay. The whole place was stamped with squalid failure.

He found his sister's house on the outskirts of the town, where a nagging wind set the peeling posters flapping on an abandoned hoarding and drove the flock of straws and papers along the empty street. The house was badly built and out of repair like all the rest. For some time there was no answer to his knock, and when at length the door was opened it was slowly, as with suspicion. It seemed that for the moment he did not recognise his sister, so changed was she from the

plump easy woman whom he had pictured as the writer of that letter. Now he could better understand his uneasiness at her appeal, for she was pale and thin, disordered in her dress and harassed in expression. She had acquired little nervous movements which seemed new to him and which distressed him. He had expected her to greet him with some warmth of gratitude for his prompt response to her letter, and was surprised to find her manner cold and constrained.

The front door opened into a dark and airless lobby, at the end of which he could see a door panelled with coloured glass. In there, his sister whispered, the Chemist conducted his experiments; their combined sitting and dining-room was on the first floor. Ascending the stairs they reached the first landing which led to two short flights of five stairs each—the house was as clumsily planned as it was badly built—one leading to a bedroom in the front of the house and the other to another landing out of which the sitting-room opened. Where the stairs met this second landing a Japanese bead curtain hung across the way. The Traveller noticed how the long strings of beads clicked together as they closed behind him, and wondered why women loved to hang such ugly, useless things about the place. The sitting-room was at once cold and stuffy, the smouldering fire serving rather to raise a draught than to warm the room. They sat on either side of the hearth in constrained silence.

Well? he said, at last. I'm glad you came, she said; it's the child I'm troubled about. The child? he said; I thought perhaps it was money. No, you needn't have thought that, she protested; my husband earns enough to keep us, though it's true we're not rich; he's all right about money. No, it's the child; I'm terribly anxious about him; it gets worse and worse; it's horrible, it's horrible.

She spoke the last words more to herself than to him, and it was clear that now she had persuaded him to come.

down to help her she was unwilling to talk about her trouble. Her womanish unreason tried his temper, but he was sorry for her at the same time. He tried, clumsily enough, to soothe and coax her. At the first kind word she began crying silently ; he left her time to recover a little and then began to question her. Was it, he asked, the child's health ? Yes, it was his health ; he had been ailing for a long time now ; but it was more than that, she said, something worse than that. Do you mean it's his mind ? the Traveller asked. Yes, I suppose so, she replied with hesitation ; I don't know, I don't know.

It seemed that at this moment the child entered, moving with an unnatural staidness which argued an appalling lack of vitality. It was impossible to guess his age from his grey, expressionless face ; his head was large, far too large for his flimsy body and mean limbs. Good evening, Uncle, said the child. Do you know me, then ? asked the Traveller, eyeing him curiously. Why, yes, replied the child ; you're my mother's brother. But how do you know that ? asked his mother uneasily ; I never told you he was coming. The child shook his head indifferently and walked soberly out of the room, not troubling to close the door. The bead curtain could be heard clicking outside as he passed through. The Traveller rose and closed the door after him.

Well, he said, sitting down, what's wrong with the child then ? is he always like that ? Yes, always the same, she said. And what does he do all day ? asked the Traveller, does he play ? No. Does he read, or what ? No, she said, he doesn't often read ; he just sits there quite quiet, thinking to himself ; he doesn't speak much. Well, said the Traveller, he certainly doesn't look very healthy ; do you think this place doesn't suit him ? No, replied his sister, it's a poor place, but the air is good ; and she went on to explain that they had settled here simply on account of the child, the

doctor recommending the East Coast, and the Chemist being offered the business, cheap, a day or two later. But the child did not seem to have benefited by the change ; indeed it seemed rather that he was gradually getting worse, though it would be hard to define what was wrong with him. The Traveller asked whether the child was in the hands of a good doctor. No, his sister said, her husband would have nothing to do with doctors. Why ? he asked ; does he think that the child is well ? No, she said, but he insists on treating the child himself ; that's what frightens me.

The Traveller, sitting with his back to the door, became aware that he was being watched. He turned sharply. The door, which he remembered having closed after the child, was open, and an enormous red-headed man was standing framed in the doorway, his hand on the knob. He took two silent steps into the room, still staring at the Traveller, who noticed that he walked in his socks. You gave me a turn, he said ; do you always go about like that ? The Chemist nodded, chuckled softly, and walked out again. The Traveller closed the door after him. I don't like people to creep about the place like that, he said, shaking himself. He opened the door again, suddenly, but there was no one on the landing. Let's light the gas,² he said, and draw the curtain ; it's a wretched evening.

So he treats the child himself ? he asked after a minute or two had passed. Yes, she said. Gives him medicine, does he ? Yes, she said. He's not qualified to prescribe, said the Traveller ; he's no right to do that ; even doctors don't treat their own family. He *will* do it, she said, though I beg him to let me take the child to a doctor ; but he won't hear of it. Does he give any reason ? He says the doctors don't know their job, she said ; he gives the child a dose of some kind night and morning ; he mixes it himself in the room downstairs I showed you ; sometimes he makes me

give it him. And have you no idea what the stuff is ? asked her brother. No ; but he thinks it's something wonderful.

The Traveller asked her why she did not take the child to see a doctor without letting her husband know, but she said she would not dare. He would find out somehow, however dark she kept it ; the child might tell him, for she knew that the two talked together sometimes when they were alone. And suppose he did get to know, her brother asked, what then ? I don't know, she said, but I'm frightened of him. And so was he, a little, the Traveller realised ; still, he must do what he could for his sister, who was clearly ready to break down. He told her that if she would tell her husband, in front of him, that she insisted on the child's being properly treated and refused to give him any more of the drug, he would support her as best he could. But she must nerve herself to face it out this evening, for to-morrow business would call him back to London. She seemed grateful for the offer, but was afraid, she said, to be left alone with her husband afterwards. Nonsense, he said ; he's never ill-treated you, has he ? Look, you speak to him to-night, and to-morrow morning we'll both take the child along to see the doctor ; then we'll come back here together and the three of us can talk it over quietly and see whether he'll abide by what the doctor says : if the doctor says, as he's sure to, that the child must take nothing but what he prescribes himself, then your husband will have to agree to it, of course, and if he goes back on his word you just send a wire to me and let me know. In the meantime I'll make a few enquiries and find out the rights of the case in law. What can he do to you, anyway ? You mustn't let your nerves get out of hand, you know. Why, even suppose the man was a homicidal lunatic, you've got the neighbours at hand to help you ; and perhaps you could get someone in to sleep with you. . . .

This time he was prepared and turned as the door opened. The Chemist entered noiselessly, placing on the table a medicine glass half full of a clear liquid. He looked across at his wife with an air of malevolent inquiry. She gazed back at him helplessly and at last gave a timid answer, Very well. He nodded and silently left the room. He knows, he knows, she whispered when the door was shut; didn't you see the way he looked at me? Well, he may have guessed, said her brother uneasily; you should have told him then, you know. I couldn't, she said. The Traveller found himself infected by her fear. It was absurd; the Chemist was a big brute, far more powerful than himself, but it was ridiculous to suppose that there would be appeal to physical force. Angry with himself for his qualms he took up the glass and threw its contents into the fire. There, he said, that's the end of that; I'll speak to him when he comes back; don't you worry.

She left him to put the child to bed, coming back later to lay the cold supper. The Chemist joined them in his shirt-sleeves, his fingers browned with acid. Not two words were spoken throughout the meal. As they rose from the table the Chemist said, Did you give it him? No, said the Traveller, she did not. The Chemist ignored him and asked his wife again, Did you give it him? No, she said, very white, I....knocked it over. That's not true, said her brother; I threw it on the fire; the child must see a doctor; you can't go on treating him yourself, he's getting worse and worse. The Chemist still looked across the table at his wife. You won't give it him, then? he asked. The Traveller nodded urgently at his sister. No, she said desperately, I won't. The Chemist gave a low chuckle, nodded, and left the room in his stockinged feet.

There, said the Traveller when he was gone, that's over now; that wasn't so bad, was it? She was still white with

the strain. That's not all, she said ; he'll not take it as quietly as that. Nonsense, said her brother ; what can he do ? After all, there are two of us. I don't know, she said ; but he'll come back, I know he will. The Traveller, although he laughed at his sister's fears, was careful to take a seat from which he could command the door. They sat there in uncomfortable silence until gradually, since all was quiet, the woman's colour returned and they found themselves in conversation. They spoke of old friends, names forgotten for ten or twenty years, reviving childish memories as the only common ground between them. The Traveller, a lonely man, wondered why he had seen his sister so rarely in the past, resented her marriage with this dour brute of a husband. It was true, he said to himself, blood was thicker than water after all ; and he told her that if this trouble should end in a breach with her husband she might look to him ; she could keep house for him and bring the child ; he was not a marrying man, but he found it a poor life that was spent in furnished rooms and commercial hotels.

The evening passed for them both in a gentle melancholy which made them loath to leave the fireside. Well, said the Traveller at last, it's getting late ; it's been a quiet evening after all, you see ; you'll be all right now, won't you ? I'll sit up with you if you'd rather. Yes, I'm all right now, she said ; thank you, you've been very kind to me.....I'll show you to your room. That's all right, he said ; and we'll go and see the doctor in the morning. He opened the door while his sister drew back the curtains and opened the window top and bottom to air the room. Outside there was a high wind which made a sudden draught in the close atmosphere. The stairs and landing were dark and the house was in complete silence.

As he stood there with his hand on the door knob he heard his sister behind him give a little gasp. What's up

now ? he said, looking round. She was staring at the gas-burner over the mantelpiece. The flame flickered and then ceased, leaving the room dark except for what dim, diffused light filtered through the driving clouds and in at the narrow window. He said, What's wrong with it ; does it want a shilling ? No, she said breathlessly, it's not a slot³ meter ; I've never known it do this before. Well, he said, there's not much odds now we're off to bed ; you've got candles. . . Hush, she said, didn't you hear it, didn't you. . . . She stopped, breathless. He could hear a slight rustling like wind among the leaves, a tiny click-click from the landing ; then, suddenly, framed in the doorway, enormous in the gloom, stood the Chemist, an axe raised above his shoulder. The Traveller recoiled instinctively, and on the instant the man was through the door and making straight across the room at his wife. There was a scream, a scuffle, and a crash. Crossing the room in panic the Traveller found his sister still cowering against the further wall while the Chemist lay inert upon the floor, his head in the hearth. The Traveller examined his face in what small glow came from the dying fire ; the forehead was wet with blood. Realising quickly that he had tripped and stunned himself he feverishly tried to turn his mind to action. Quick, he said, we must tie him up before he comes round ; what have you got ? Have you got any rope ? Quick, for God's sake ; tear the table-cloth into strips ; if he comes round first he'll kill the two of us ; he's killing-mad. He struck a match to find the axe, which he hid in a corner. Here you are, said his sister ; will these do ? She was stuttering with fear, but she had kept her nerve. That's right, he said ; here, you must help me ; we must do it in the dark, there's no time to get a candle. In the dim light they fumbled with the limp wrists and ankles, lashing them together as tightly as they could with the clumsy strips of serge. Pull, said the Traveller ; never

mind hurting him ; it's either him or us. At last they had him tied, dragged and pushed him towards the table, and made him fast as best they could to the legs. Now, said the Traveller, get a candle, several, and some rope or cord ; here are the matches ; I'll watch him till you come back. I'm frightened, she said ; I daren't go downstairs alone. You must, he said urgently ; I can't leave you with him, he isn't safe like this ; quick, now, there's a good girl. She went.

Left alone, the Traveller examined the body again. The heart was still beating and the blood on the forehead was already nearly dry ; soon he would be coming round. If only she would hurry with that cord—their makeshift lashings would not hold him long, a great brute of a man with a maniac's strength at that. At a pinch they might both cut and run while he was struggling to get free ; but if he did get loose he'd kill someone before he'd finished. He wondered whether there was a telephone in the place. His sister came back with a candle, the only one, she said, in the house, and a good length of stout box-cord. The light was cheering, and the Traveller was able to secure the brute's hands and feet carefully and at his leisure. There, he said at last, straightening his back ; he's safe enough for the present ; now, is there a 'phone in the house ? Good ; go down and ring up the police and tell them to send round several men, with a strait-jacket, if they've got one, as soon as they can. Oh, but I'm frightened, she said ; it's so dark on the stairs ; don't make me go. I'm afraid you'll have to, he said ; here, you can take the candle ; come, it's nearly over now ; run along quick, there's a good girl, and the police will be along in a minute or two, and then everything will be all right. He could see that she was ready to collapse at any minute, but she took the candle and went downstairs.

In the dark he heard a low moan ; soon, his eyes growing accustomed to the absence of the candle, he could see some

movement in the huge figure³ on the floor. He knew that the brute had come to and was trying to free himself. The table creaked. You can't get loose, said the Traveller sharply; you'll only hurt yourself trying. There was another moan followed by silence. The woman returned with the candle. Are they coming? he asked. Yes, she said, they promised to send the men at once. How far, he asked, is the police station? The other end of the town, she said, but it won't.....She broke off with a scream as her eye fell on the Chemist. Look, she whispered, look, he's watching us. At that the Chemist shut his eyes and moaned again. For God's sake loose me, he whined; these cords are killing me. Don't answer him, said the Traveller; we can't take any risks. For God's sake, the Chemist whined again in his vile Greenock⁴ speech, for God's sake let go my legs from the table so I can lie straight. We could do that, couldn't we? said the woman weakly. No, snapped her brother; we can't take any risks.

The Chemist began to talk, lucidly enough; he was all right now, he said, they need not be afraid; he didn't mind being tied up so long as they would ease him a little; he was suffering terribly. When the Traveller ignored him he began to excite himself, threatening and imploring them by turns. He strained at the cords without effect, groaning and gasping, his face distorted, saliva trickling from his mouth. Then he lay still and began to talk rapidly about the child; it was *his* child, he said, and it was to be a genius, a superman, the greatest man that ever lived; fools that they were to stop the treatment, they should not stop it, he was the father and it was for him to say. His speech grew thicker, his accent so strong as to make his words barely intelligible. The boy was to be the greatest man that ever lived; it was simple, it was easy, but no one else had found the way to do it. Hemp, Indian Hemp, Cannabis

Indica ; they understood it in the East ; but here, what did the doctors use it for ? Chlorodyne and corn cures ; no one knew but him, it was his discovery ; steady dosing, minute at first but increasing month by month, from early childhood, and there was your genius, there was your pure intellect ; fools were afraid of drugs, the doctors said they were harmful, yet all the great men had taken drugs in one form or another, all of them ; they had suffered because the effect on the adult brain was to disintegrate the mental controls and unbalance the faculties ; but steady assimilation by the growing brain, that was *his* discovery, no one else had seen it ; it was simple but all the clever people missed it. The child would be the greatest man the world had ever seen ; and but for meddling fools. He broke off, panting.

There was a silence. The woman sat cowering in a chair, gazing fascinated at her husband. They're a long time coming, said the Traveller at last. Yes, said his sister, they should have been here by now. The Chemist was eyeing them cunningly ; he began to whine and wheedle. He was safe now, he said ; they could let him go ; he must have his way with the child, that was all ; cross him there and he was fighting-mad, but, that apart, he was as sane as they were. There was no response. He moaned, pulling feebly at the cords. Water, he gasped, for the love of Christ. Give him some water, said the woman, if you think it's safe. The Traveller filled a glass from the carafe on the sideboard and, kneeling warily beside the Chemist's head, poured the water into his open mouth. The Chemist spluttered and spat it out. You'll choke me, he said between his coughs ; loose my hands and let me take it myself ; I can't drink lying here. The Traveller shook his head. For the love of Christ, whined the Chemist, just let my hands go from the table so I can sit up. The Traveller shook his head.

There came a loud knocking at the front door which

echoed through the still house. Quick, said the Traveller, run down and let them in ; here, take the candle. Between them, in their haste, they dropped it and were in the dark. Quick, where are the matches ? said the Traveller, fumbling on the table. I left them downstairs, she said. Then you'll have to go in the dark, there's nothing else for it ; there's not a spark left in the fire. I can't, I daren't, she whimpered ; I can't face those stairs again. The knocking was repeated. For God's sake, said the Traveller sharply, pull yourself together ; you *must* go—very well, then, I'll go myself and you must watch him. There came a low groan from the floor. No, cried the woman, don't leave me with him, I can't bear it, he'll kill me, he'll kill me. While the Traveller stood perplexed the knocking was repeated, louder. Then we must leave him, he said desperately, and both go down. No, no, she sobbed ; he'll break loose and kill us on the stairs ; we mustn't leave him.....I'll go. She went to the door but drew back in terror from the dark landing. It's no good, she said helplessly ; you go, you'll have to. Yes, I'll have to, he said ; there they are again, that's the last time they'll knock ; they'll think it's a hoax and clear off. Now watch him and don't answer a word ; don't give him the water whatever he says ; I'll be back with the police in thirty seconds. Now, watch him.

As he ran downstairs there suddenly came into his mind an explanation which he had not been seeking : that the Chemist had turned the gas off at the main before making his attack. Reaching the hall he flung open the front door. There was no one on the step. The high wind had cleared the sky and the street lay in bright moonlight. He stepped out on to the pavement, looked to the left—there was no one—looked to the right, and there, turning the corner at the end of the street, was a posse of policemen. They were gone. He shouted, too late. He could not make up his

mind to leave his sister alone with that brute any longer, trussed up though he was; he was afraid that her nerve would go completely. But if he rang up the station they might have decided that it was a hoax and merely ring off. Every moment as he considered the policemen were further away. He must ring up and take his chance of persuading them. He stepped back to the open door; in front of him the hall yawned velvet black after the moonlight. As he stood, half in the light, half in the shadow, he heard the tiny sound of a scuffle upstairs, a crash, a scream cut short as it began, then nothing. The house was silent. Then he heard a quiet click-click at the head of the stairs. Silence again; he could hear nothing and see nothing in the darkness. There was the least sound of a little shuffle on the stairs like a faint breeze, and his ears, keyed up by fear, caught the sound of rough fingertips feeling their way down the wall. He felt sick; his heart shook him, but he could not move. There was a dim whiteness in the gloom and then the glint of steel; then it seemed that he heard a slow deep chuckle from the foot of the stairs. . . .

NOTES

¹ to die, to sleep

No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart ache, and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation

Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;

To sleep, *perchance to dream*; ay, there's the rub

For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil

Must give us pause. ("Hamlet"—Shakespeare).

² *Light the gas*.—Lighting by coal gas is a stage in the process of illumination from oil to electricity which India has jumped. It still exists widely in England.

³ *Slot meter*.—The gas did not come through a meter which only supplied it when coins were dropped in; instead the meter was read once a quarter and a bill sent in for the amount burned. This is a subtle distinction made by gas companies according to their estimate of the likelihood of people being able to pay their bills or not.

⁴ *Gresnock*.—A town in Scotland, near Glasgow, where the Scots accent is especially marked.

A TALE OF THE GREAT PLAGUE¹

THOMAS HOOD

1799-1845

Hood lived from 1799 to 1845 and was one of those men who have a keen appreciation of literature and enjoy the friendship and respect of greater writers than themselves. He had a decided turn of humour, and left a series of humorous poems, which though not very good, have nothing like them in literature.

ABOUT five or six years after that deplorable great Plague of London, there befell a circumstance which, as it is not set forth in Defoe² in his history of the pestilence, I shall make bold to write down herein, not only on account of the strangeness of the event, but also because it carried a moral pick-a-back, as a good story ought to do.

It is a notoriously known fact, as collected from the bills of mortality, that there died of the plague in the mere metropolis a matter of some hundreds of thousands of human souls: yet notwithstanding this most awful warning to evil-doers, the land did nevertheless bring forth such a rank crop of sin and wickedness, that the like was never known before or after; the city of London, especially, being overrun with bands of thieves and murtherers, against whom there was little or no check, the civical police having been utterly disbanded and disrupt during the ravages of the pestilence. Neither did men's minds turn for some time towards the mere safeguard of property, being still distracted with personal fears; for although the pest had, as it were, died of the excess of its own violence, yet from time to time there arose flying rumours of fresh breakings out of the malady. The small-pox and the malignant fever being the prolific parent of such like alarms. Accordingly many notable robberies and divers

grievous murders having been acted with impunity during the horrible crisis of the pest, those which had before been wicked were now hardened, and became a thousand times worse, till the city and the neighbourhood thereof seemed given in prey to devils, who had been loosened for a season from the everlasting fetter of the law.

Now four of these desperadoes having met together at the Dolphin³ in Deptford, they laid a plot together to rob a certain lone mansion house which stood betwixt the Thames marshes and the Forest of Hainault, and which was left in the charge of only one man, the family being gone off to another mansion house in the country of Wiltshire, for the sake of a more wholesome air. And the manner of the plot was this : one of the villains going in a feigned voice was to knock at the front door and beg piteously for a night's shelter, and then, the door being opened, the other knaves were to rush in and bind the serving-man, or murder him, as might seem best, and so taking his keys they were to ransack the house, where they expected to find a good store of plate. Accordingly one Friday, at the dead of the night, they set forth, having for leader a fellow that was named Blackface by reason of a vizard which he wore always on such errands, diverting themselves by the way with laying out each man his share of the booty in the manner that pleased him best, wine and the women of Lewkenor's Lane coming in, you may be sure, for the main burthen of the song.⁴ At last they entered the fore-court of the house which they were to rob, and which was as silent as death, and as dark, excepting a glimmer from one window towards the top. Blackface then, as agreed upon, began to beat at the door, but being flushed with drink, instead of entreating for an entrance, he shouted out to the serving-man, bidding him with many terrible oaths to come down and to render up his keys, for that they were come to relieve him of his charge.

"In the name of God, my masters," cried the serving-man from the window, "what do you want here?"

"We are come," returned Blackface, "to relieve you of your trust, so throw us down your keys."

"An that be all," said the serving-man, whose name was Adams, "wait but a little while and you shall have the keys and my place to boot. Come again but a few hours hence, and you shall find me dead, when you may do with me and my trust as you list."

"Come, come," cries Blackface, "no preaching, but come down and open, or we will bring fire and faggot to the door."

"Ye shall not need," answered Adams, "hearken only to what I say, and you shall have free passage; but I give you fair warning though I be but a single man, and without weapon, and sick even unto death, yet shall your coming in cost you as many lives as ye bear amongst you, for within these walls there is a dismal giant that hath slain his thousands, even the Plague." At these dreary words the courage of the robbers was taken somewhat aback, but Blackface spirited them on, saying it was no doubt an invention to deter them from the spoil.

"Alas," answered Adams, who overheard their argument, "what I say is the solemn and sorrowful truth, and which I am speaking for the last time, for I shall never see to-morrow's blessed sun. As for the door, I will open it to you with my own hands, beseeching you for your own sakes to stand a little apart, and out of the taint of my breath, which is sure destruction. There is one child herein a dead corpse, as you shall behold if you have so much courage, for it lieth unburied in the hall." So saying he descended, and presently flung open the hall door, the villains withdrawing a little backward, and they saw verily by the light of a rush wick which he carried that he was lapt only in a white sheet, and looking

very pale and ghost-like, with a most dismal black circle round each of his eyes.

"If ye disbelieve me still," he said, "look inwards when I draw back from the door, and ye shall see what was a living child this day, but is now a corpse hastening to corruption. Alas! in the midst of life we are in death: she was seized at play." With these words he drew aside, and the robbers, looking through the door, perceived it was even as he said, for the dead body of the child was lying on the hall table, with the same black ring round its eyes, and dressed in brocade and riband as though death had carried it off, even as he said, in its holiday clothes. "Now," said Adams, after they had gazed awhile, "here be the keys," therewithal passing towards them a huge bunch; but the villains would now no more meddle with them than with so many aspicks or scorpions, looking on them as the very keys of death's door. Accordingly, after venting a few curses on their ill-luck, they began to depart in very ill humour, when Adams again called to them to hear his last words.

"Now," said he, "though ye came hither with robbery, and perchance murther in your hearts, against me, yet as a true Christian will I not only forgive your wicked intents, but advise you how to shun that miserable end which my own life is coming to so very suddenly. Although your souls have been saved from sins, yet doubtless ye have not stood so long in this infected air without peril to the health of your bodies, wherefore by the advice of a dying man, go straightway from this over to Laytonstone,⁵ where there be tan-pits,⁶ and sit there for a good hour amidst the strong smell of the tan, and which hath more virtue as a remedy against the infection of the Plague, than even tobacco or the odour of drugs. Do this and live, for the poison is strong and subtle, and seizeth ere one can be aware on the springs of life." Thereupon, he uttered a dismal groan, and began yelling

so fearfully that the robbers, with one accord took to flight, and never stopped till they were come to Laytonstone, and into the tanner's very yard, where they sat down and stooped over the pit, snuffing up the odours with all the relish of men in whose nostrils it was as the breath of life. In which posture they had been sitting half an hour, when there entered several persons with a lantern, and which they took to be the tanner and his men, and to whom, therefore, they addressed themselves, begging pardon for their boldness, and entreating leave to continue awhile in the tan-yard to disinfect themselves of the plague; but they had hardly uttered these words, when lo! each man was suddenly seized upon, and bound in a twinkling, the constables, for such they were, jeering them withal, and saying the Plague had been too busy to come itself, but had sent them a gallows and a halter instead, which would serve their turn. Whereupon most of the rogues became very chopfallen, but Blackface swore he could die easy but for one thing upon his mind, and that was what had become of the dead child and the man dying of the plague, both of which he had seen with his own eyes. Hereupon, the man with a lantern turned the light upon his own face which the rogues knew directly to be the countenance of Adams himself, but without any of those black rings round the eyes, and for which he explained he had been indebted to a little charcoal. "As for the dead child," he said, "you must inquire, my masters, of the worshipful company of Barber Surgeons, and they will tell you of a certain waxen puppet of Hygeia, the Goddess of Health, which used to be carried at their pageants, and when it fell into disuse was purchased of them by my Lady Dame Ellinor Wood," for a plaything for her own children. So one head, you see, is worth four pair of hands, and your whole gang, tall and strong knaves though you be, have been overmatched by one old man and a doll."

NOTES

¹ *The Great Plague* : A great outbreak of plague in London in 1664-65; probably the fire of 1666 which followed it was a blessing rather than a curse, and allowed London to be rebuilt. Plague was very common in Europe throughout mediæval times, but has disappeared now, perhaps with better public hygiene.

² *Defoe* : A well-known writer, author of 'Robinson Crusoe.'

³ *The Dolphin* : An inn with that name and a painted sign of a dolphin outside. All inns in Europe have such names and signs usually of some bird or beast, real or legendary, such as The Green Dragon, The Lion, The Three Fishes; some are humorous, e.g., 'The Man with a Load of Mischief' has a picture of a man with a woman on his back.

⁴ *Main burthen of the song* : Its chief tune or theme.

⁵ *Laytonstone* : A town.

⁶ *Tan-pits* : Containing the buried bark of oak and other trees to convert hides into leather.

⁷ *Dame Ellinor Wood* : The owner of the house. Dame is a title of honour given to women, and the real title of the wives of barons, baronets and knights, although they are normally called Lady.

THE SIRE DE MALÉTROIT'S DOOR

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

1850-1894

Stevenson was born in Edinburgh in 1850, and was destined by his family to become an engineer and by his training a lawyer. He was called to the Bar in 1875 but never practised, and took to writing, which for years he had been eager to do. His health was poor and finally he travelled abroad seeking a suitable climate, settling eventually in Samoa where he died aged only 44. Stevenson was a writer lower than the greatest who has nevertheless won as much affection from his readers as any other. In both his novels and stories his charming, graceful style, attractive but strong, has always captured people's hearts. This story is from "The New Arabian Nights."

DENIS DE BEAULIEU was not yet two-and-twenty, but he counted himself a grown man, and a very accomplished cavalier into the bargain. Lads were early formed in that rough, warfaring epoch; and when one has been in a pitched battle and a dozen raids, has killed one's man in an honourable fashion,¹ and knows a thing or two of strategy and mankind, a certain swagger in the gait is surely to be pardoned. He had put up his horse with due care, and supped with due deliberation; and then, in a very agreeable frame of mind, went out to pay a visit in the grey of the evening. It was not a very wise proceeding on the young man's part. He would have done better to remain beside the fire or go decently to bed. For the town was full of the troops of Burgundy and England under a mixed command: and though Denis was there on safe-conduct, his safe-conduct was like to serve him little on a chance encounter.

It was September 1429;² the weather had fallen sharp; a flighty piping wind, laden with showers, beat about the township; and the dead leaves ran riot along the streets. Here and there a window was already lighted up; and the

noise of men-at-arms making merry—ever supper within came forth in fits and was swallowed up and carried away by the wind. The night fell swiftly; the flag of England, fluttering on the spire-top, grew ever fainter and fainter against the flying clouds—a black speck like a swallow in the tumultuous, leaden chaos of the sky. As the night fell the wind rose, and began to hoot under archways and roar amid the tree-tops in the valley below the town.

Denis de Beaulieu walked fast and was soon knocking at his friend's door; but though he promised himself to stay only a little while and make an early return, his welcome was so pleasant, and he found so much to delay him, that it was already long past midnight before he said good-bye upon the threshold. The wind had fallen again in the meanwhile; the night was as black as the grave; not a star, nor a glimmer of moonshine, slipped through the canopy of cloud. Denis was ill-acquainted with the intricate lanes of Château Landon; even by daylight he had found some trouble in picking his way; and in this absolute darkness he soon lost it altogether. He was certain of one thing only—to keep mounting the hill; for his friend's house lay at the lower end, or tail, of Château Landon, while the inn was up at the head, under the great church spire. With this clue to go upon he stumbled and groped forward, now breathing more freely in open places where there was a good slice of sky overhead, now feeling along the wall in stifling closes. It is an eerie and mysterious position to be thus submerged in opaque blackness in an almost unknown town. The silence is terrifying in its possibilities. The touch of cold window bars to the exploring hand startles the man like the touch of a toad; the inequalities of the pavement shake his heart into his mouth; a piece of denser darkness threatens an ambuscade or a chasm in the pathway; and where the air is brighter, the houses put on strange and bewildering

appearances, as if to lead him farther from his way. For Denis, who had to regain his inn without attracting notice, there was real danger as well as mere discomfort in the walk ; and he went warily and boldly at once, and at every corner paused to make an observation.

He had been for some time threading a lane so narrow that he could touch a wall with either hand, when it began to open out and go sharply downward. Plainly this lay no longer in the direction of his inn ; but the hope of a little more light tempted him forward to reconnoitre. The lane ended in a terrace with a bartizan wall, which gave an outlook between high houses, as out of an embrasure, into the valley lying dark and formless several hundred feet below. Denis looked down, and could discern a few tree-tops waving and a single speck of brightness where the river ran across a weir. The weather was clearing up, and the sky had lightened, so as to show the outline of the heavier clouds and the dark margin of the hills. By the uncertain glimmer, the house on his left hand should be a place of some pretensions ; it was surmounted by several pinnacles and turret-tops ; the round stern of a chapel, with a fringe of flying buttresses, projected boldly from the main block ; and the door was sheltered under a deep porch carved with figures and overhung by two long gargoyles. The windows of the chapel gleamed through their intricate tracery with a light as of many tapers, and threw out the buttresses and the peaked roof in a more intense blackness against the sky. It was plainly the hôtel³ of some great family of the neighbourhood ; and as it reminded Denis of a town house of his own at Bourges, he stood for some time gazing up at it and mentally gauging the skill of the architects and the consideration of the two families.

There seemed to be no issue to the terrace but the lane by which he had reached it ; he could only retrace his steps.

but he had gained some notion of his whereabouts, and hoped by this means to hit the main thoroughfare and speedily regain the inn. He was reckoning without that chapter of accidents which was to make this night memorable above all others in his career ; for he had not gone back above a hundred yards before he saw a light coming to meet him, and heard loud voices speaking together in the echoing narrows of the lane. It was a party of men-at-arms going the night round⁴ with torches. Denis assured himself that they had all been making free with the wine-bowl, and were in no mood to be particular about safe-conducts or the niceties of chivalrous war. It was as like as not that they would kill him like a dog and leave him where he fell. The situation was inspiring but nervous. Their own torches would conceal him from sight, he reflected ; and he hoped that they would drown the noise of his footsteps with their own empty voices. If he were but fleet and silent, he might evade their notice altogether.

Unfortunately, as he turned to beat a retreat, his foot rolled upon a pebble ; he fell against the wall with an ejaculation, and his sword rang loudly on the stones. Two or three voices demanded who went there—some in French, some in English ; but Denis made no reply, and ran the faster down the lane. Once upon the terrace, he paused to look back. They still kept calling after him, and just then began to double the pace in pursuit, with a considerable clank of armour, and great tossing of the torchlight to and fro in the narrow jaws of the passage.

Denis cast a look around and darted into the porch. There he might escape observation, or—if that were too much to expect—was in a capital posture whether for parley or defence. So thinking, he drew his sword and tried to set his back against the door. To his surprise, it yielded behind his weight ; and though he turned in a moment, continued

to swing back on oiled and noiseless hinges, until it stood wide open on a black interior. When things fall out opportunely for the person concerned, he is not apt to be critical about the how or why, his own immediate personal convenience seeming a sufficient reason for the strangest oddities and revolutions in our sublunary things; and so Denis, without a moment's hesitation, stepped within and partly closed the door behind him to conceal his place of refuge. Nothing was further from his thoughts than to close it altogether; but for some inexplicable reason—perhaps by a spring or a weight—the ponderous mass of oak whipped itself out of his fingers and clanked to, with a formidable rumble and a noise like the falling of an automatic bar.

The round, at that very moment, debouched upon the terrace and proceeded to summon him with shouts and curses. He heard them ferreting in the dark corners; and the stock of a lance even rattled along the outer surface of the door behind which he stood; but these gentlemen were in too high a humour to be long delayed, and soon made off down a corkscrew pathway which had escaped Denis's observation, and passed out of sight and hearing along the battlements of the town.

Denis breathed again. He gave them a few minutes' grace for fear of accidents, and then groped about for some means of opening the door and slipping forth again. The inner surface was quite smooth, not a handle, not a moulding, not a projection of any sort. He got his finger-nails round the edges and pulled, but the mass was immovable. He shook it, it was as firm as a rock. Denis de Beaulieu frowned and gave vent to a little noiseless whistle. What ailed the door? he wondered. Why was it open? How came it to shut so easily and so effectually after him? There was something obscure and underhand about all this that was little to the young man's fancy. It looked like a snare;

and yet who could suppose a snare in such a quiet by-street and in a house of so prosperous and even noble an exterior ? And yet—snare or no snare, intentionally or unintentionally—here he was, prettily trapped ; and for the life of him he could see no way out of it again. The darkness began to weigh upon him. He gave ear ; all was silent without, but within and close by he seemed to catch a faint sighing, a faint sobbing rustle, a little stealthy creak—as though many persons were at his side, holding themselves quite still, and governing even their respiration with the extreme of slyness. The idea went to his vitals with a shock, and he faced about suddenly as if to defend his life. Then, for the first time, he became aware of a light about the level of his eyes and at some distance in the interior of the house—a vertical thread of light, widening towards the bottom, such as might escape between two wings of arras⁵ over a doorway. To see anything was a relief to Denis ; it was like a piece of solid ground to a man labouring in a morass ; his mind seized upon it with avidity ; and he stood staring at it and trying to piece together some logical conception of his surroundings. Plainly there was a flight of steps ascending from his own level to that of this illuminated doorway ; and indeed he thought he could make out another thread of light, as fine as a needle and as faint as phosphorescence, which might very well be reflected along the polished wood of a handrail. Since he had begun to suspect that he was not alone, his heart had continued to beat with smothering violence, and an intolerable desire for action of any sort had possessed itself of his spirit. He was in deadly peril, he believed. What could be more natural than to mount the staircase, lift the curtain, and confront his difficulty at once ? At least he would be dealing with something tangible ; at least he would be no longer in the dark. He stepped slowly forward with outstretched hands, until his foot struck the bottom

step ; then he rapidly scaled the stairs, stood for a moment to compose his expression, lifted the arras and went in.

He found himself in a large apartment of polished stone. There were three doors ; one on each of three sides ; all similarly curtained with tapestry. The fourth side was occupied by two large windows and a great stone chimney-piece, carved with the arms of the Malétroits. Denis recognized the bearings, and was gratified to find himself in such good hands. The room was strongly illuminated ; but it contained little furniture except a heavy table and a chair or two, the hearth was innocent of fire, and the pavement was but sparsely strewn with rushes clearly many days old.

On a high chair beside the chimney, and directly facing Denis as he entered, sat a little old gentleman in a fur tippet. He sat with his legs crossed and his hands folded, and a cup of spiced wine stood by his elbow on a bracket on the wall. His countenance had a strongly masculine cast ; not properly human, but such as we see in the bull, the goat, or the domestic boar ; something equivocal and wheedling, something greedy, brutal, and dangerous. The upper lip was inordinately full, as though swollen by a blow or a toothache ; and the smile, the peaked eyebrows, and the small, strong eyes were quaintly and almost comically evil in expression. Beautiful white hair hung straight all round his head, like a saint's, and fell in a single curl upon the tippet. His beard and moustache were the pink of venerable sweetness. Age, probably in consequence of inordinate precautions, had left no mark upon his hands ; and the Malétroit hand was famous. It would be difficult to imagine anything at once so fleshy and so delicate in design ; the taper, sensual fingers were like those of one of Leonardo's⁶ women ; the fork of the thumb made a dimpled protuberance when closed ; the nails were perfectly shaped, and of a dead, surprising whiteness. It rendered his aspect tenfold more redoubtable, that a man

with hands like these should keep them devoutly folded in his lap like a virgin martyr—that a man with so intense and startling an expression of face should sit patiently on his seat and contemplate people with an unwinking stare, like a god, or a god's statue. His quiescence seemed ironical and treacherous, it fitted so poorly with his looks.

Such was Alain, Sire de Malétroit.

Denis and he looked silently at each other for a second or two.

'Pray step in,' said the Sire de Malétroit. 'I have been expecting you all the evening.'

He had not risen, but he accompanied his words with a smile, and a slight but courteous inclination of the head. Partly from the smile, partly from the strange musical murmur with which the Sire prefaced his observation, Denis felt a strong shudder of disgust go through his marrow. And what with disgust and honest confusion of mind, he could scarcely get words together in reply.

'I fear,' he said, 'that this is a double accident. I am not the person you suppose me. It seems you were looking for a visit; but for my part, nothing was further from my thoughts—nothing could be more contrary to my wishes—than this intrusion.'

'Well, well,' replied the old gentleman indulgently, 'here you are, which is the main point. Seat yourself, my friend, and put yourself entirely at your ease. We shall arrange our little affairs presently.'

Denis perceived that the matter was still complicated with some misconception, and he hastened to continue his explanations.

'Your door . . . ' he began.

'About my door?' asked the other, raising his peaked eyebrows. 'A little piece of ingenuity.' And he shrugged his shoulders. 'A hospitable fancy! By your own account,

you were not desirous of making my acquaintance. We old people look for such reluctance now and then ; and when it touches our honour, we cast about until we find some way of overcoming it. You arrive uninvited, but believe me, very welcome.'

'You persist in error, sir,' said Denis. 'There can be no question between you and me. I am a stranger in this country-side. My name is Denis, damoiseau de Beaulieu. If you see me in your house, it is only——'

'My young friend,' interrupted the other, 'you will permit me to have my own ideas on that subject. They probably differ from yours at the present moment,' he added with a leer, 'but time will show which of us is in the right.'

Denis was convinced he had to do with a lunatic. He seated himself with a shrug, content to wait the upshot ; and a pause ensued, during which he thought he could distinguish a hurried gabbling as of prayer from behind the arras immediately opposite him. Sometimes there seemed to be but one person engaged, sometimes two ; and the vehemence of the voice, low as it was, seemed to indicate either great haste or an agony of spirit. It occurred to him that this piece of tapestry covered the entrance to the chapel he had noticed from without.

The old gentleman meanwhile surveyed Denis from head to foot with a smile, and from time to time emitted little noises like a bird or a mouse, which seemed to indicate a high degree of satisfaction. This state of matters became rapidly insupportable ; and Denis, to put an end to it, remarked politely that the wind had gone down.

The old gentleman fell into a fit of silent laughter, so prolonged and violent that he became quite red in the face. Denis got upon his feet at once, and put on his hat with a flourish.

'Sir,' he said, 'if you are in your wits, you have affronted me grossly. If you are out of them, I flatter myself I can find better employment for my brains than to talk with lunatics. My conscience is clear; you have made a fool of me from the first moment; you have refused to hear my explanations; and now there is no power under God will make me stay here any longer; and if I cannot make my way out in a more decent fashion, I will hack your door in pieces with my sword.'

The Sire de Malétroit raised his right hand and wagged it at Denis with the fore and little fingers extended.

'My dear nephew,' he said, 'sit down.'

'Nephew!' retorted Denis, 'you lie in your throat'; and he snapped his fingers in his face.

'Sit down, you rogue!' cried the old gentleman, in a sudden, harsh voice, like the barking of a dog. 'Do you fancy,' he went on, 'that when I had made my little contrivance for the door I had stopped short with that? If you prefer to be bound hand and foot till your bones ache, rise and try to go away. If you choose to remain a free young buck, agreeably conversing with an old gentleman—why, sit where you are in peace, and God be with you.'

'Do you mean I am a prisoner?' demanded Denis.

'I state the facts,' replied the other. 'I would rather leave the conclusion to yourself.'

Denis sat down again. Externally he managed to keep pretty calm; but within, he was now boiling with anger, now chilled with apprehension. He no longer felt convinced that he was dealing with a madman. And if the old gentleman was sane, what, in God's name, had he to look for? What absurd or tragical adventure had befallen him? What countenance was he to assume?

While he was thus unpleasantly reflecting, the arras that overhung the chapel door was raised, and a tall priest

in his robes came forth and, giving a long, keen stare at Denis, said something in an undertone to Sire de Malétoit.

'She is in a better frame of spirit?' asked the latter.

'She is more resigned, messire,' replied the priest.

'Now the Lord help her, she is hard to please!' sneered the old gentleman. 'A likely stripling—not ill-born—and of her own choosing, too? Why, what more would the jade have?'

'The situation is not usual for a young damsel,' said the other, 'and somewhat trying to her blushes.'

'She should have thought of that before she began the dance? It was none of my choosing, God knows that: but since she is in it, by our Lady, she shall carry it to the end.' And then addressing Denis, 'Monsieur de Beaulieu,' he asked, 'may I present you to my niece? She has been waiting your arrival, I may say, with even greater impatience than myself.'

Denis had resigned himself with a good grace—all he desired was to know the worst of it as speedily as possible; so he rose at once, and bowed in acquiescence. The Sire de Malétoit followed his example and limped, with the assistance of the chaplain's arm, towards the chapel door. The priest pulled aside the arras, and all three entered. The building had considerable architectural pretensions. A light groining sprang from six stout columns, and hung down in two rich pendants from the centre of the vault. The place terminated behind the altar in a round end, embossed and honey-combed with a superfluity of ornament in relief, and pierced by many little windows shaped like stars, trefoils, or wheels. These windows were imperfectly glazed, so that the night air circulated freely in the chapel. The tapers, of which there must have been half a hundred burning on the altar, were unmercifully blown about; and the light went through many different phases of brilliancy and semi-

eclipse. On the steps in front of the altar knelt a young girl richly attired as a bride. A chill settled over Denis as he observed her costume ; he fought with desperate energy against the conclusion that was being thrust upon his mind ; it could not—it should not—be as he feared.

‘Blanche,’ said the Sire, in his most flute-like tones, ‘I have brought a friend to see you, my little girl ; turn round and give him your pretty hand. It is good to be devout ; but it is necessary to be polite, my niece.’

The girl rose to her feet and turned towards the newcomers. She moved all of a piece ; and shame and exhaustion were expressed in every line of her fresh young body ; and she held her head down and kept her eyes upon the pavement, as she came slowly forward. In the course of her advance, her eyes fell upon Denis de Beaulieu’s feet—feet of which he was justly vain, he it remarked, and wore in the most elegant accoutrement even while travelling. She paused—started, as if his yellow boots had conveyed some shocking meaning—and glanced suddenly up into the wearer’s countenance. Their eyes met ; shame gave place to horror and terror in her looks ; the blood left her lips ; with a piercing scream she covered her face with her hands and sank upon the chapel floor.

‘That is not the man !’ she cried. ‘My uncle ; that is not the man !’

The Sire de Malétroit chirped agreeably. ‘Of course not,’ he said, ‘I expected as much. It was so unfortunate you could not remember his name.’

‘Indeed,’ she cried, ‘indeed, I have never seen this person till this moment—I have never so much as set eyes upon him—I never wish to see him again. Sir,’ she said, turning to Denis, ‘if you are a gentleman, you will bear me out. Have I ever seen you—have you ever seen me—before this accursed hour ?’

'To speak for myself,' I have never had that pleasure,' answered the young man. 'This is the first time, messire, that I have met with your engaging niece.'

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

'I am distressed to hear it,' he said. 'But it is never too late to begin. I had little more acquaintance with my own late lady ere I married her; which proves,' he added with a grimace, 'that these impromptu marriages may often produce an excellent understanding in the long-run. As the bridegroom is to have a voice in the matter, I will give him two hours to make up for lost time before we proceed with the ceremony.' And he turned towards the door, followed by the clergyman.

The girl was on her feet in a moment. 'My uncle, you cannot be in earnest,' she said. 'I declare before God I will stab myself rather than be forced on that young man. The heart rises at it; God forbids such marriages; you dishonour your white hair. Oh, my uncle, pity me! There is not a woman in all the world but would prefer death to such a nuptial. Is it possible,' she added, faltering—'is it possible that you do not believe me—that you still think this'—and she pointed at Denis with a tremor of anger and contempt—'that you still think *this* to be the man?'

'Frankly,' said the old gentleman, pausing on the threshold, 'I do. But let me explain to you once for all, Blanche de Malétoit, my way of thinking about this affair. When you took it into your head to dishonour my family and the name that I have borne, in peace and war, for more than threescore years, you forfeited, not only the right to question my designs, but that of looking me in the face. If your father had been alive, he would have spat on you and turned you out of doors. His was the hand of iron. You may bless your God you have only to deal with the hand of velvet, mademoiselle. It was my duty to get you married

without delay. Out of pure goodwill, I have tried to find your own gallant for you. And I believe I have succeeded. But before God and all the holy angels, Blanche de Malétoit, if I have not, I care not one jack-straw.' So let me recommend you to be polite to our young friend ; for upon my word, your next groom may be less appetising.'

And with that he went out, with the chaplain at his heels ; and the arras fell behind the pair.

The girl turned upon Denis with flashing eyes.

'And what, sir,' she demanded, 'may be the meaning of all this ?'

'God knows,' returned Denis gloomily. 'I am a prisoner in this house, which seems full of mad people. More I know not ; and nothing do I understand.'

'And pray how came you here ?' she asked.

He told her as briefly as he could. 'For the rest,' he added, 'perhaps you will follow my example, and tell me the answer to all these riddles, and what, in God's name, is like to be the end of it.'

She stood silent for a little, and he could see her lips tremble and her tearless eyes burn with a feverish lustre. Then she pressed her forehead in both hands.

'Alas, how my head aches !' she said wearily—'to say nothing of my poor heart ! But it is due to you to know my story, unmaidenly as it must seem. I am called Blanche de Malétoit : I have been without father or mother for—oh ! for as long as I can recollect, and indeed I have been most unhappy all my life. Three months ago a young captain began to stand near me every day in church. I could see that I pleased him ; I am much to blame, but I was so glad that any one should love me ; and when he passed me a letter, I took it home with me and read it with great pleasure. Since that time he has written many. He was so anxious to speak with me, poor fellow ! and kept asking me to leave

the door open some evening that we might have two words upon the stair. For he knew how much my uncle trusted me.' She gave something like a sob at that, and it was a moment before she could go on. 'My uncle is a hard man, but he is very shrewd,' she said at last. 'He has performed many feats in war, and was a great person at court, and much trusted by Queen Isabeau^s in old days. How he came to suspect me I cannot tell; but it is hard to keep anything from his knowledge; and this morning, as we came from mass, he took my hand in his, forced it open, and read my little billet, walking by my side all the while. When he had finished, he gave it back to me with great politeness. It contained another request to have the door left open; and this has been the ruin of us all. My uncle kept me strictly in my room until evening, and then ordered me to dress myself as you see me—a hard mockery for a young girl; do you not think so? I suppose, when he could not prevail with me to tell him the young captain's name, he must have laid a trap for him: into which alas! you have fallen in the anger of God. I looked for much confusion; for how could I tell whether he was willing to take me for his wife on these sharp terms? He might have been trifling with me from the first; or I might have made myself too cheap in his eyes. But truly I had not looked for such a shameful punishment as this! I could not think that God would let a girl be so disgraced before a young man. And now I have told you all; and I can scarcely hope that you will not despise me.'

Denis made her a respectful inclination.

'Madam,' he said, 'you have honoured me by your confidence. It remains for me to prove that I am not unworthy of the honour. Is Messire de Malétroit at hand?'

'I believe he is writing in the salle without,' she answered.

'May I lead you thither, madam ?' asked Denis, offering his hand with his most courtly bearing.

She accepted it ; and the pair passed out of the chapel, Blanche in a very drooping and shamefast condition, but Denis strutting and ruffling in the consciousness of a mission, and the bôyish certainty of accomplishing it with honour.

The Sire de Malétroit rose to meet them with an ironical obeisance.

'Sir,' said Denis, with the grandest possible air, 'I believe I am to have some say in the matter of this marriage ; and let me tell you at once, I will be no party to forcing the inclination of this young lady. Had it been freely offered to me, I should have been proud to accept her hand, for I perceive she is as good as she is beautiful ; but as things are, I have now the honour, messire, of refusing.'

Blanche looked at him with gratitude in her eyes ; but the old gentleman only smiled and smiled, until his smile grew positively sickening to Denis.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'Monsieur de Beaulieu, that you do not perfectly understand the choice I have to offer you. Follow me, I beseech you, to this window.' And he led the way to one of the large windows which stood open on the night. 'You observe,' he went on, 'there is an iron ring in the upper masonry, and reeved through that a very efficacious rope. Now, mark my words : if you should find your disinclination to my niece's person insurmountable, I shall have you hanged out of this window before sunrise. I shall only proceed to such an extremity with the greatest regret, you may believe me. For it is not at all your death that I desire, but my niece's establishment in life. At the same time, it must come to that if you prove obstinate. Your family, Monsieur de Beaulieu, in very well in its way ; but if you sprang from Charlemagne, you should not refuse the hand of a Malétroit with impunity—not if she had been

as common as the Paris road—not if she were as hideous as the gargoyle over my door. Neither my niece nor you, nor my own private feelings, move me at all in this matter. The honour of my house has been compromised; I believe you to be the guilty person; at least you are now in the secret; and you can hardly wonder if I request you to wipe out the stain. If you will not, your blood be on your own head! It will be no great satisfaction to me to have your interesting relics kicking their heels in the breeze below my windows; but half a loaf is better than no bread, and if I cannot cure the dishonour, I shall at least stop the scandal.’

There was a pause.

‘I believe there are other ways of settling such imbroglios among gentlemen,’ said Denis. ‘You wear a sword, and I hear you have used it with distinction.’

The Sire de Malétroit made a signal to the chaplain, who crossed the room with long silent strides and raised the arras over the third of the three doors. It was only a moment before he let it fall again; but Denis had time to see a dusky passage full of armed men.

‘When I was a little younger, I should have been delighted to honour you, Monsieur de Beaulieu,’ said Sire Alain; ‘but I am now too old. Faithful retainers are the sinews of age, and I must employ the strength I have. This is one of the hardest things to swallow as a man grows up in years; but with a little patience, even this becomes habitual. You and the lady seem to prefer the *salle* for what remains of your two hours; and as I have no desire to cross your preference, I shall resign it to your use with all the pleasure in the world. No haste!’ he added, holding up his hand, as he saw a dangerous look come into Denis de Beaulieu’s face. ‘If your mind revolts against hanging, it will be time enough two hours hence to throw yourself out of the window or upon the pikes of my retainers. Two hours of life are always two

hours. A great many things may turn up in even as little a while as that. And, besides, if I understand her appearance, my niece has still something to say to you. You will not disfigure your last hours by a want of politeness to a lady ?

Denis looked at Blanche, and she made him an imploring gesture.

It is likely that the old gentleman was hugely pleased at this symptom of an understanding ; for he smiled on both, and added sweetly : ‘ If you will give me your word of honour. Monsieur de Bealieu, to await my return at the end of the two hours before attempting anything desperate, I shall withdraw my retainers, and let you speak in greater privacy with mademoiselle.’

Denis again glanced at the girl, who seemed to beseech him to agree.

‘ I give you my word of honour,’¹⁰ he said.

Messire de Malétroit bowed, and proceeded to limp about the apartment, clearing his throat the while with that odd musical chirp which had already grown so irritating in the ears of Denis de Beaulieu. He first possessed himself of some papers which lay upon the table ; then he went to the mouth of the passage and appeared to give an order to the men behind the arras ; and lastly, he hobbled out through the door by which Denis had come in, turning upon the threshold to address a last smiling bow to the young couple, and followed by the chaplain with a hand-lamp.

No sooner were they alone than Blanche advanced towards Denis with her hands extended. Her face was flushed and excited, and her eyes shone with tears.

‘ You shall not die !’ she cried, ‘ you shall marry me after all.’

‘ You seem to think, madam,’ replied Denis, ‘ that I stand much in fear of death.’

‘ Oh no, no,’ she said, ‘ I see you are no poltroon. It

is for my own sake—I could not bear to have you slain her for such a scruple.'

'I am afraid,' returned Denis, 'that you underrate the difficulty, madam. What you may be too generous to refuse, I may be too proud to accept. In a moment of noble feeling towards me, you forgot what you perhaps owe to others.'

He had the decency to keep his eyes upon the floor as he said this, and after he had finished, so as not to spy upon her confusion. She stood silent for a moment, then walked suddenly away, and falling on her uncle's chair, fairly burst out sobbing. Denis was in the acme of embarrassment. He looked round, as if to seek for inspiration, and seeing a stool, plumped down upon it for something to do. There he sat, playing with the guard of his rapier, and wishing himself dead a thousand times over, and buried in the nastiest kitchen-heap in France. His eyes wandered round the apartment, but found nothing to arrest them. There were such wide spaces between the furniture, the light fell so baldly and cheerlessly over all, the dark outside air looked in so coldly through the windows, that he thought he had never seen a church so vast, nor a tomb so melancholy. The regular sobs of Blanche de Malétroit measured out the time like the ticking of a clock. He read the device upon the shield over and over again, until his eyes became obscured; he stared into shadowy corners until he imagined they were swarming with horrible animals; and every now and again he awoke with a start, to remember that his last two hours were running, and death was on the march.

Often and oftener, as the time went on, did his glance settle on the girl herself. Her face was bowed forward and covered with her hands, and she was shaken at intervals by the convulsive hiccup of grief. Even thus she was not an unpleasant object to dwell upon, so plump and yet so fine, with a warm brown skin, and the most beautiful hair, Denis

thought, in the whole world of womankind. Her hands were like her uncle's; but they were more in place at the end of her young arms, and looked infinitely soft and caressing. He remembered how her blue eyes had shone upon him, full of anger, pity, and innocence. And the more he dwelt on her perfections, the uglier death looked, and the more deeply was he smitten with penitence at her continued tears. Now he felt that no man could have the courage to leave a world which contained so beautiful a creature; and now he would have given forty minutes of his last hour to unsay his cruel speech.

Suddenly a hoarse and ragged peal of cockcrow rose to their ears from the dark valley below the windows. And this shattering noise in the silence of all around was like a light in a dark place, and shook them both out of their reflections.

'Alas, can I do nothing to help you?' she said, looking up.

'Madam,' replied Denis, with a fine irrelevancy, 'if I have said anything to wound you, believe me, it was for your own sake and not for mine.'

She thanked him with a tearful look.

'I feel your position cruelly,' he went on. 'The world has been bitter hard on you. Your uncle is a disgrace to mankind. Believe me, madam, there is no young gentleman in all France but would be glad of my opportunity, to die in doing you a momentary service.'

'I know already that you can be very brave and generous,' she answered. 'What I *want* to know is whether I can serve you—now or afterwards,' she added, with a quaver.

'Most certainly,' he answered with a smile. 'Let me sit beside you as if I were a friend, instead of a foolish intruder; try to forget how awkwardly we are placed to one

another; make my last moments go pleasantly; and you will do me the chief service possible.'

'You are very gallant,' she added, with a yet deeper sadness . . . 'very gallant . . . and it somehow pains me. But draw nearer, if you please; and if you find anything to say to me, you will at least make certain of a very friendly listener. Ah! Monsieur de Beaulieu,' she broke forth—'ah! Monsieur de Beaulieu, how can I look you in the face?' And she fell to weeping again with a renewed effusion.

'Madam,' said Denis, taking her hand in both of his, 'reflect on the little time I have before me, and the great bitterness into which I am cast by the sight of your distress. Spare me, in my last moments, the spectacle of what I cannot cure even with the sacrifice of my life.'

'I am very selfish,' answered Blanche. 'I will be braver, Monsieur de Beaulieu, for your sake. But think if I can do you no kindness in the future—if you have no friends to whom I could carry your adieux. Charge me as heavily as you can; every burden will lighten, by so little the invaluable gratitude I owe you. Put it in my power to do something more for you than weep.'

'My mother is married again, and has a young family to care for. My brother Guichard will inherit my fiefs; and if I am not in error, that will content him amply for my death. Life is a little vapour that passeth away, as we are told by those in holy orders. When a man is in a fair way and sees all life open in front of him, he seems to himself to make a very important figure in the world. His horse whinnies to him; the trumpets blow and the girls look out of window as he rides into town before his company; he receives many assurances of trust and regard—sometimes by express in a letter—sometimes face to face, with persons of great consequence falling on his neck. It is not wonderful if his head is turned for a time. But once he is dead, were

he as brave as Hercules or as wise as Solomon, he is soon forgotten. It is not ten years since my father fell, with many other knights around him, in a very fierce encounter, and I do not think that any one of them, nor so much as the name of the fight, is now remembered. No, no, madam, the nearer you come to it, you see that death is a dark and dusty corner, where a man gets into his tomb and has the door shut after him till the Judgment Day. I have few friends just now, and once I am dead I shall have none.'

'Ah, Monsieur de Beaulieu!' she exclaimed, 'you forget Blanche de Malétroit.'

'You have a sweet nature, madam, and you are pleased to estimate a little service far beyond its worth.'

'It is not that,' she answered. 'You mistake me if you think I am so easily touched by my own concerns, I say, so, because you are the noblest man I have ever met; because I recognize in you a spirit that would have made even a common person famous in the land.'

'And yet here I die in a mousetrap—with no more noise about it than my own squeaking,' answered he.

A look of pain crossed her face, and she was silent for a little while. Then a light came into her eyes, and with a smile she spoke again.

'I cannot have my champion think meanly of himself. Any one who gives his life for another will be met in Paradise by all the heralds and angels of the Lord God. And you have no such cause to hang your head. For. . . Pray, do you think me beautiful?' she asked, with a deep flush.

'Indeed, madam, I do,' he said.

'I am glad of that,' she answered heartily. 'Do you think there are many men in France who have been asked in marriage by a beautiful maiden—with her own lips—and who have refused her to her face? I know you men would half despise such a triumph; but believe me, we women know

more of what is precious in love. There is nothing that should set a person higher in his own esteem ; and we women would prize nothing more dearly.'

'You are very good,' he said ; 'but you cannot make me forget that I was asked in pity and not for love.'

'I am not so sure of that,' she replied, holding down her head. 'Hear me to an end, Monsieur de Beaulieu. I know how you must despise me ; I feel you are right to do so, I am too poor a creature to occupy one thought of your mind, although, alas ! you must die for me this morning. But when I asked you to marry me, indeed, and indeed, it was because I respected and admired you, and loved you with my whole soul, from the very moment that you took my part against my uncle. If you had seen yourself, and how noble you looked, you would pity rather than despise me. And now,' she went on, hurriedly checking him with her hand, 'although I have laid aside all reserve and told you so much, remember that I know your sentiments towards me already. I would not, believe me, being nobly born, weary you with importunities into consent, I too have a pride of my own ; and I declare before the holy mother of God, if you should now go back from your word already given, I would no more marry you than I would marry my uncle's groom.'

Denis smiled a little bitterly.

'It is a small love,' he said, 'that shies at a little pride.'

She made no answer, although she probably had her own thoughts.

'Come hither to the window,' he said, with a sigh, 'Here is the dawn.'

And indeed the dawn was already beginning. The hollow of the sky was full of essential daylight, colourless and clean ; and the valley underneath was flooded with a grey reflection. A few thin vapours clung in the coves of the forest or lay along the winding course of the river. The

scene disengaged a surprising effect of stillness, which was hardly interrupted when the cocks began once more to crow among the steadings. Perhaps the same fellow who had made so horrid a clangour in the darkness not half an hour before, now sent up the merriest cheer to greet the coming day. A little wind went bustling and eddying among the treetops underneath the windows. And still the daylight kept flooding insensibly out of the east, which was soon to grow incandescent and cast up that red hot cannonball, the rising sun.

Denis looked out over all this with a bit of a shiver. He had taken her hand and retained it in his almost unconsciously.

‘Has the day begun already?’ she said; and then, illogically enough: ‘the night has been so long! Alas! what shall we say to my uncle when he returns?’

‘What you will,’ said Denis, and he pressed her fingers in his.

She was silent.

‘Blanche,’ he said, with a swift, uncertain, passionate utterance, ‘you have seen whether I fear death. You must know well enough that I would as gladly leap out of that window into the empty air as lay a finger on you without your free and full consent. But if you care for me at all, do not let me lose my life in a misapprehension; for I love you better than the whole world; and though I will die for you blithely, it would be like all the joys of Paradise to live on and spend my life in your service.’

As he stopped speaking, a bell began to ring loudly in the interior of the house; and a clatter of armour in the corridor showed that the retainers were returning to their post, and the two hours were at an end.

‘After all that you have heard?’ she whispered, leaning towards him with her lips and eyes.

'I have heard nothing,' he replied.

'The captain's name was Florimond de Champdivers,' she said in his ear.

'I did not hear it,' he answered, taking her supple body in his arms, and covered her wet face with kisses.

A melodious chirping was audible behind, followed by a beautiful chuckle, and the voice of Messire de Malétroit wished his new nephew a good morning.

NOTES

¹ *in honourable fashion*: In a duel fought over an insult to honour. Duels with deadly weapons are now illegal of course.

² 1429: In the time of Henry VI when England was still carrying on apparently interminable wars with France. The people of Burgundy (now a French province) had been fighting with the English, for at that time the French crown had not absorbed Burgundy or several other districts.

³ *hotel*: A house of entertainment, to-day only used for large modern inns.

⁴ *night round*: A round of inspection by a guard.

⁵ *arras*: A rich tapestry hung over walls of big houses: later it gave way to carved panelling of timber as a wall decoration. Rushes on the floor preceded carpets, especially when horses might be ridden into a room, or dogs live in it.

⁶ *Leonardo's*: An Italian painter. The 'Mona Lisa' is a portrait of such a sensual woman reproduced often enough for students possibly to have come across it.

⁷ *Jack-straw*: A strip of straw or wood, a heap of which are placed in a pile, when a game is played in which player in turn has to remove a straw without disturbing the rest of the pile. A thing of no account.

⁸ *Queen Isabeau*: Wife of Charles VI of France, who went insane. She eventually surrendered France to England by a treaty with Henry V, in 1420, depths from which France soon recovered amazingly with the leadership of Joan of Arc.

⁹ *Charlemagne*: The famous early mediæval European Emperor, a great warrior who tried to patch up the decayed Roman Empire.

¹⁰ *Word of honour*: To break this would have been the greatest disgrace a Knight could have brought on himself; this absolute faith in a gentleman's word once spoken was one of the greatest achievements of the Middle Ages of Europe.

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI¹

WILLIAM SYDNEY PORTER
(‘O. HENRY’)

1867-1910

O. Henry was the pen-name adopted by William Sydney Porter, an American, born in 1867. As a youth he worked on a ranch in Texas, but soon joined the staff of a newspaper. Then he spent three years in prison wrongly convicted of embezzling funds from a bank. Eventually he came to New York, where he wrote a great many stories, mostly for magazines. Like Poe he devoted nearly all his time to the short story and exerted considerable influence over it. In particular he concentrated on the manner as well as on the matter, and made the story more than ever brief, concentrated, curt; wasting no time, writing only of the barest essentials. And he made it at the same time democratic, an entertainment for the crowd as well as for fastidious readers. His warm, kindly humour, ironical but always sympathetic, have made him as popular as with his considerable merits he deserves to be. He died in 1910.

ONE dollar² and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing³ the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing left to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the look-out for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name 'Mr. James Dillingham Young.'

The 'Dillingham' had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, the letters of 'Dillingham' looked blurred, as though they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called 'Jim' and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked, out dully at a grey cat walking a grey fence in a grey back-yard. To-morrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honour of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier-glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier-glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face

had lost its colour within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out of the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket ; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out of the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read : ' Mme Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds.' One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the ' Sofronie.'

' Will you buy my hair ?' asked Della.

' I buy hair,' said Madame. ' Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it.'

Down rippled the brown cascade.

' Twenty dollars,' said Madame, lifting the mass with a practised hand.

' Give it to me quick,' said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor⁴. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain⁵ simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

'If Jim doesn't kill me,' she said to herself, 'before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island⁶ chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?'

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying little silent prayers about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: 'Please, God, make him think I am still pretty.'

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stepped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

'Jim, darling,' she cried, 'don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold it because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say "Merry Christmas!" Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you.'

'You've cut off your hair?' asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet, even after the hardest mental labour.

'Cut it off and sold it,' said Della. 'Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?'

Jim looked about the room curiously.

'You say your hair is gone?' he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

'You needn't look for it,' said Della. 'It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. May be the hairs of my head were numbered?' she went on with a sudden serious sweetness, 'but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?'

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

'Don't make any mistake, Dell,' he said, about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first.'

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped for long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise-shell, with jeweled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least

hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: 'My hair grows so fast, Jim!'

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, 'Oh, oh!'

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

'Isn't it a dandy?', Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it.'

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

'Dell,' said he, 'let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on.'

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication.¹⁰ And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

NOTES

¹ *The Magi*: The three wise men who brought gifts to the Infant Christ from the East.

² *One dollar*: Nearly 3 rupees, 100 cents make one dollar.

³ *bulldoze*: U. S. slang, to coerce, quell.

⁴ *hashed metaphor*: A metaphor old but often used as new: from 'hashed meat,' meat already once cooked served up again as another dish.

⁵ *fob chain*: A chain to enable a watch to be kept in the fob, a small pocket at the top of the trousers. It is a rare habit to-day to keep them thus. Watches are usually carried in a waistcoat pocket (or on the wrist).

⁶ *Coney Island*: A pleasure resort near to New York.

⁷ *The hairs of my head were numbered*: Christ, in assuring his apostles that no harm would come to them in preaching, said "But the very hairs of your head are all numbered."

⁸ *Broadway*: A New York street, in the very centre of the city.

⁹ *dandy*: Fine one.

¹⁰ *privilege of exchange in case of duplication*: A privilege given by some shops if people buy presents for their friends which later they are found already to possess.